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The Nation.

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John Feffer

KATRINA ONE YEAR AFTER

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SEPTEMBER 18, 2006
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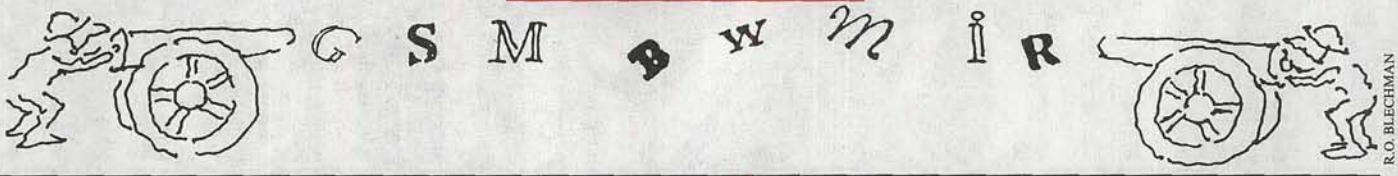

ELECTIONS? HOW QUAINT

It's an unhappy commentary on our times that we got a flurry of mail from agitated readers who took Stephen Gillers's satiric "Bush Postpones 2008 Election" [Aug. 14/21] as gospel. Despite a "2008" dateline and other cues, permanent GOP government didn't seem all that farfetched to many. —*The Editors*

Front Royal, Va.

■ Dear Lord, if you are there, please don't let Stephen Gillers's article be real. Please let it be facetious. Don't let the 2008 dateline be a misprint. This story is so believable, including the reactions of Lieberman and Clinton, it could be so. Let it not be! Amen! GAIL CRIGER

West Carrollton, Ohio

■ You may want to save Stephen Gillers's article for reprint. Given the current Administration, you may only have to change a few quotes when the story becomes reality in the next couple of years. CURT WOODIE

Scottsdale, Ariz.

■ Let me offer an alternate nightmare scenario: A die-hard group of Bush neocons contend that since W's first term was determined by Supreme Court appointment and not election results, he has served only one elected term. Ergo, he is technically eligible to seek re-election for a second term. Naturally the Supreme Court will uphold this contention 5 to 4. BOB AMENTO

Vicksburg, Mich.

■ I will regret having to chide Stephen Gillers, but a 2008 search of Lexis-Nexis will find a more complete Bush quote on the flexibility of the Constitution: Adopting the cloak of the civil right's movement, the President further commented that "it's a fundamental American right to reinvent the Constitution—like that black preacher guy in the '60's on votin'; a thing that Jimbo [Baker] and me unreinvented [*sic*] in Florida in 2000. Why, I wasn't even President at the time. Just a governor like Jeb. And remember how me and my good Texas friend Dick Cheney fixed it to call him a Wyomingite—a little reterpretation [*sic*] of a constitutional requirement for the Prez and Vice Prez to be different states. Everyone does it." MARC ELLIOTT

CRACKPOT REALISM INDEED

New York City

■ Bravo to Alexander Cockburn for his August 14/21 "Beat the Devil" column! The first three paragraphs alone are worth the price of my subscription ("conditions in the outside world bounce off the impenetrable dome of imbecility sheltering America's political leadership"). It was so hysterically funny, I laughed so hard, until I woke up and realized oh shit, it's not a satire, it's not a dream and it's not a comedy. It's reality. Then I got so depressed I needed to get therapy. Thanks a lot, Mr. Cockburn. I'll be sending you a bill. TSUH YANG CHEN

ALL OUR BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

Columbia, Md.

■ Kim Hillstrom's response to the "War Is Personal—III" photo essay truly pained my heart ["Letters," July 31/Aug. 7]. Do these people (Bush, Cheney & Co.) understand what they have done and what we and the world will be living with for decades to come? I pray for this woman's beautiful child and, for that matter, all the beautiful children caught up on both sides of this madness. BASIL O. GORDON

HARLEM RENAISSANCE MYSTERY GAL

New York City

■ Sad to say, it has taken sixty years of life and the failure of my own literary ambitions to read of the life of Nella Larsen and see through the words into the pain, dignity, tenacity and courage of such a person [Darryl Pinckney, "Shadows," July 17/24]. I hope someone finds her building on the Lower East Side and erects a plaque, if only for the one child who may see it, learn about Larsen and change the world. DANIEL FOLEY

MUSLIM WOMEN ON ISLAM REFORM

Bloomington, Ind.

■ As a Muslim woman living and writing in the West, I was quite frustrated at the arguments presented by Laila Lalami in "The Missionary Position" [June 19]. Admittedly, the works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji, with their caustic rhetoric and brash denigration of Muslims, are of questionable value if their purpose is to encourage reform within the Islamic world. And Lalami is right to point out that Muslim women have become a cause célèbre for powerful interests that seek to exploit their plight in order to justify wars as "humanitarian" interventions.

However, Lalami never acknowledges the fundamental difference between her understanding of the relationship between doctrine and practice and that of the authors. Both Hirsi Ali and Manji believe that Islam and the actions of Muslims are inextricably intertwined, and that the power of Islam as a religious doctrine must be held partly accountable for the ills faced by women in Muslim society. In contrast, Lalami wants to draw a line in the sand between Islam and the acts of Muslims who, she suggests, have adopted a narrow or fundamentalist reading of the Koran.

True enough, there is a distinction between doctrine and practice in any religion. But this distinction does not absolve Muslims from taking responsibility for the impact that gender oppression, indiscriminate violence against civilians and other actions carried out in the name of Islam have had on the religion's identity. In dismissing Hirsi Ali's and Manji's critiques because they refuse to endorse this distinction, Lalami unwittingly plays into the hands of the very fundamentalists she claims to abhor. Her insistence on holding the West accountable, while legitimate, comes dangerously close to the kind of Islamist rhetoric that finds it easy to blame the West while at the same time denying the need for any reform within Islam.

While I agree with Lalami that Hirsi Ali and Manji fail to recognize the distinction between Islamic doctrine and practice (and reveal an inadequate understanding of the doctrine, to boot), I wonder whether she recognizes the consequences of her argument. If Western critiques of Islam are inescapably tainted by imperialism and orientalism (is this true of Western feminists who oppose American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan?), and the critique of Muslim women such as Hirsi Ali and Manji is deemed worthless for its conflation of Islam and Muslims, who has the right to criticize the religion? Is it only the writers she cites in her article? My question to Ms. Lalami is whether it isn't precisely these claustrophobic and crippling limits on critique that are ultimately most detrimental to both Islam and Muslims? RAFIA ZAKARIA

LALAMI REPLIES

Portland, Ore.

■ Everyone has a right to criticize Islam, or indeed any other set of beliefs, whether religious or otherwise. My article was not about who has a right to criticize but rather about the intellectual import of such criticism. In my judgment, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin* and Irshad Manji's *The Trouble With Islam Today* are unfortunately rife with oversimplifications and inaccuracies, and display a lack of understanding of even basic tenets of the religion.

I cited other authors and scholars because I was refuting the argument put forth in both books that there is no criticism of Islam by Muslims. I did not endorse these scholars' work, and I certainly did not suggest that they have more, or less, right to criticize than either Hirsi Ali or Manji. Similarly, I never said or implied that Western critiques of Islam are "inescapably tainted by imperialism and orientalism." Instead, my comments were aimed at polemical

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EDITORIALS

Katrina One Year After

First came the storm. Then came the flood. And then—and still—the catastrophe. New Orleanians had long feared the "big one," the kind of hurricane that could make mincemeat of the levees and wreck huge swaths of their city. They never imagined that the big wallop would come not from nature but from the federal government. "This is the United States of America!" Katrina victims hollered into TV cameras, with voices mingling despair and disbelief, in the days following the floods. Even those who had grown up in the dankest, most forlorn parts of the city could not believe they were being abandoned in such a dramatic way, with such a roundhouse punch, by the world's great "beacon of democracy." One year later, they know better: This is the United States, a country that has by and large abandoned the Gulf Coast to the social Darwinism of the corporate *banditi*. It isn't because we've lost the ability to care. It's because we've left behind something larger than New Orleans: our notion of collective social responsibility. We have forgotten, somewhere along the way, the basic fact that America is and was, before anything else, a society.

"What happened in New Orleans is the culmination of twenty-five years of disparagement of any idea of public responsibility," Adolph Reed Jr. writes in *Unnatural Disaster*, a collection of *Nation* reports and essays from the first year of the still-unfolding Gulf Coast disaster (see excerpt, page 26). For nearly three decades, American voters have endorsed the neoliberal gospel first preached during the Reagan years—voting for the ideas that the best responses to public problems come from the private domain, that tax collection amounts to thievery and that a fully functioning government is an unnecessary and prohibitively expensive frill meant to impoverish working people. Many of the social protections gradually assembled during the twentieth century have been systematically dismantled, defunded and discredited, with results every bit as predictable, and every bit as tragic, as the collapse of the levees. As both Reed and Gary Younge (page 17) reveal in this issue, what the Gulf Coast disaster has laid bare is not just the shame of racial and economic inequities in the world's richest nation but a wider breach of the social contract that once bound us to one another, however loosely and imperfectly.

It is all too convenient for progressive-minded Americans and Democratic politicians to Bush-ify this historic national failure—to see Katrina, in Younge's words, mainly as "a signifier for an Administration that was heartless and clueless." But the storm also exposed the continuing failure of progressives and Democrats to fight for an alternative vision in which government responds to the needs and hopes of people, not the demands of monied interests. The voices of those few national leaders who have tried to articulate such a vision, including John Edwards and Jesse Jackson Jr., have largely been lost in a cacophony of shortsighted political one-upmanship. So have the accomplishments of grassroots activists, especially the hardy strain that sprang up out of the New Orleans disaster (see Chris Kromm on page 22 and Michael Tisserand on page 24).

The one strong hope found in the ruins those twelve long months ago was that the jolting images of distraught, abandoned and needlessly dead Americans would serve as a national wake-up call. In some ways, that has happened. There is clearly a stirring of mass awareness that something is seriously wrong with America, something symbolized by our foreign and domestic catastrophes. It may well be that Democrats can capitalize on this vague sense of national sickness by running a "we're not them" campaign and winning back a majority in at least one chamber of Congress this November. But if that is all that happens, the best we can hope for is a palliation of the symptoms, not a cure. While campaigning

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Democrats are right to point out the atrocious waste—in terms of money, international relations and human lives—caused by the misbegotten war in Iraq, the senseless daily waste of human lives and potential here at home must also be a central issue in this campaign, and in 2008.

Great tragedies call for visionary leadership. This is the moment for progressive leaders (along with activists and voters) to summon up the guts and foresight to forge a compelling message not just about what's come apart in America, but how to pull us back together.

COMMENT

Antiwar Primaries

Antiwar challenger Ned Lamont's defeat of prowar Senator Joe Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic primary is generally accepted as a referendum-like victory for the message that progressives have been urging the Democratic Party to embrace. But the 2006 primary season—which will see its busiest day September 12, when nine states and DC pick nominees for national seats—ought to be seen as a series of referendums on the war. Lamont's win was not the first of its kind since *The Nation* pledged last year to identify and support only those candidates prepared to bring a speedy end to the war ["Democrats and the War," November 28], nor, we hope, will it be the last.

Montana Senate contender Jon Tester and Iowa House contender Bruce Braley won primary contests before Lamont bested Lieberman August 8, and September primaries could see additional wins for candidates who want to start bringing troops home from Iraq. Some of the most telling contests will take place in Maryland. In the crowded Democratic primary to replace retiring Senator Paul Sarbanes, former NAACP president Kweisi Mfume staked out a strong antiwar position early by joining a summer 2005 rally supporting the demand by Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, for a meeting with George W. Bush. Mfume highlights his participation in protests against the war and features a "cost of war" ticker on his campaign website. That's in stark contrast to the other frontrunner, Representative Ben Cardin, who opposed authorizing the President to go to war but has failed to join the push for an exit strategy by the House Out of Iraq Caucus. Last year he voted against California Democrat Lynn Woolsey's call for a withdrawal plan, and his campaign pronouncements about the war have been distinctly cautious.

The Maryland Senate race is complicated by several less prominent candidates who have taken strong antiwar positions, but polls suggest that the contest is between Mfume and Cardin—who have split major endorsements from unions and top Democrats. A Mfume win would be another signal that grassroots Democrats want their party to join the clear majority of Americans who would like to start bringing troops home soon. A similar message could come from the state's 3rd Congressional District, where the primary frontrunner in the contest to replace

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IN THEATRES SEPTEMBER 15

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Cardin, John Sarbanes, the retiring senator's son, says, "The Democratic leadership in Congress must take action immediately—that means today—by petitioning the President to deliver to the appropriate committees in Congress within thirty days two proposed disengagement plans for Iraq: one that would bring our troops home within six months; the other that would bring them home within twelve months."

But the Maryland race that most closely resembles the Lamont–Lieberman contest is playing out in the state's 4th Congressional district, where Donna Edwards, former executive director of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, is mounting an aggressive antiwar challenge to Democratic Representative Al Wynn, who voted to authorize Bush to wage the war and who has backed the Administration on a host of other issues. Says Edwards, "Albert Wynn is Maryland's Joe Lieberman."

In Rhode Island another test of sentiments regarding the war will come in a Republican primary, where moderate Lincoln Chafee, the only GOP senator to oppose going to war, is being challenged by Steve Laffey, who has big-money support from the conservative Club for Growth. A Chafee win would set up a rare November race between two war critics, since the Democratic primary candidates share Chafee's skepticism about Iraq. The more tepidly antiwar Sheldon Whitehouse, a former state attorney general, is the clear frontrunner, but retired Marine Carl Sheeler has run a spirited "Bring Home the Troops" campaign that calls for the President's impeachment for deceiving Congress and the American people.

Every vote Sheeler wins against Whitehouse, the choice of party leaders, will tell Washington Democrats that party activists want to see more muscular opposition to Bush and his war. The same goes for votes cast in the New York Senate primary for former National Writers Union president Jonathan Tasini, who is taking on Hillary Clinton. The Lamont win in neighboring Connecticut is focusing attention on Tasini's antiwar challenge to Clinton, who has responded by edging away from her Lieberman-like support for the Administration's stay-the-course policy. Even with the *New York Times* telling Clinton she should debate Tasini—if only to clarify exactly where she now stands—the low-budget challenge to the presumed frontrunner for the party's 2008 presidential nomination faces daunting odds. But Tasini's run has succeeded in making the war what it should be in every 2006 contest: the central issue. JOHN NICHOLS

Israel Lobby Watch

For progressives who are even mildly critical of Israel, a never-ending concern is the response of the Jewish community. Generally, Jews are among the biggest backers of liberal causes. But a common refrain from liberal Jews is that Hamas and Hezbollah represent threats to Israel's very existence, and so conversations about policy take on an emotional and religious character. "There's a deep schizophrenia in some of the Jewish community, and people who are at the forefront of every single rights issue, from racial justice in the United States to the ethnic cleansing in Darfur—on Israel, it crumbles, and there is all this hand-wringing," says Sarahleah Whitson of Human Rights Watch. "And everyone [who is critical] is successfully marginalized."

The struggle for Jewish hearts and minds explains the latest battle in the ideological war over the Middle East: the firestorm over Human Rights Watch's reports from the Lebanon war. The New York City–based monitor issued a couple-dozen reports during the conflict, some sharply critical of Israel for killing civilians, and has had to fight a rear-guard action to maintain its standing among American Jews.

The leading human rights organization in the world, HRW has a dry and thorough manner that reflects its executive director, lawyer Kenneth Roth, who is given to tweezerlike fact-finding and incisive conclusions, with a moral backbeat. The restrained tone has allowed HRW to grow by half in the past five years and stay firmly in the mainstream. When I asked him if he had a special connection to the *New York Times*, which frequently cites its reports, Roth quipped, "There's a phone in the drawer."

HRW has often been critical of Israel while showing respect for its security concerns. For instance, it has condemned suicide bombing as a war crime and also assailed Israel's actions in the occupied West Bank. On July 12 the Lebanon war began, and soon escalated into a wholesale air attack by Israel on Lebanon (and, yes, a rain of Hezbollah rockets on civilian targets in Israel). HRW's first critics were the left, which felt HRW was twiddling its thumbs as hundreds died, when it alluded delicately to "potential violations of international humanitarian law" in a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. HRW did not issue more forceful statements in the first two weeks of the war, Roth says, because its two researchers couldn't get into southern Lebanon. Once they got there and spent two days visiting villages, HRW issued a fifty-page report August 3, accusing Israel of war crimes in its "indiscriminate" bombings. The researchers had documented more than a third of the reported civilian deaths at that time and could show that in none of 153 killings were Hezbollah forces or weapons "in or near the area that the IDF targeted during or just prior to the attack." HRW alleged a war crime after it visited Qana, the scene of twenty-eight civilian deaths on July 30. There Israeli missiles had hit a three-story house in which people were sheltering. Israeli officials later stated that rocket fire had originated from the village three days before the attack.

HRW's statements got international news coverage (if only two paragraphs in the *Times*) but put the group in the cross hairs of the Israel lobby, notably in the *New York Sun*. The *Sun* linked Ken Roth with Mel Gibson as an enemy of the Jewish people and said his moral compass was "haywire." It is tempting to dismiss the four-year-old *Sun*—whose most memorable contribution to American letters has been its statement that Iraq War protesters were guilty of "treason"—as a right-wing rag. Its backers include Manhattan Institute former chair Roger Hertog and Bruce Kovner, chair of the American Enterprise Institute. But Kovner is also chair of Juilliard, and the *Sun* is a sophisticated newspaper, with extensive arts and sports coverage. As managing editor Ira Stoll says, the *Sun* has influence; it represents the views of organized Jewish leaders. Among the *Sun*'s readers, says Stoll, are some of HRW's biggest financial backers. Indeed, in an edito-

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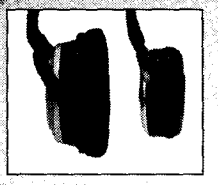

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COMMENT

rial the *Sun* said that Robert Bernstein, HRW's former chair, was having "private agonies" over the group's reports and quoted Morton Zuckerman, listed as a donor of between $25,000 and $99,000 in HRW's 2005 report, as saying the reports on Israel were an "outrage.... Human Rights Watch has lost all moral credibility."

Roth responded to every attack the *Sun* printed. In one letter he spoke of Israeli "slaughter" and wrote, "An eye for an eye—or, more accurately in this case, twenty eyes for an eye—may have been the morality of some more primitive moment." The comment was echoed in smears. The *Sun* printed a piece by Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League saying that criticisms of the Bible are a classic anti-Semitic stereotype, a diagnosis of Roth's motivation that Stoll says he shares. "In my view unfortunately and dangerously, it's increasingly respectable in mainstream circles to engage in old style anti-Jewish stereotypes," says Stoll. (It seems Roth's personal history—he went into human rights law in part because as a boy he had listened to his father's stories of escaping Nazi Germany—is sinister camouflage.)

The *Jerusalem Post* and New York *Daily News* soon piled on. Never one to miss the limelight, so did Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, who wrote on the Huffington Post that HRW had invented facts. Dershowitz then invoked Jewish solidarity: "Within the last month, virtually every component of the organized Jewish community, from secular to religious, liberal to conservative, has condemned Human Rights Watch for its bias."

Roth says that HRW was isolated in its role as Israel critic in part because the prospect of the sort of vitriol he faced has scared other groups away from even looking at the Middle East. HRW emergency director Peter Bouckaert explains, "We always get attacked for our findings by the government involved. What makes this case different is, it's not the government, it's the external lobby. We have a difficult but positive dialogue with the Israeli government and the IDF. They don't dismiss us as morally repugnant or irrelevant. They take our findings seriously. The attacks are not about the facts, they're about insulating Israel from any type of criticism."

Bouckaert says the attacks represent a real threat to HRW. "All we have is our reputation for credibility and impartiality. We have a lot of Jewish donors and funders, and I think Ken wants to be sure they don't think of us as not impartial."

At the height of the criticism, HRW organized a conference call with Bouckaert and two other researchers who were on the ground in the Middle East and members of the HRW board, to explain their methods. "They made it clear that they understood the political sensitivities and were bending over backward to be impartial," says Michael Gellert, an HRW board member. So much bending over backward can give a fact-finder a backache. Bouckaert says that Israel is "an emotionally upsetting place to work" because while he sometimes feels outrage at Israeli actions, he is compelled to report publicly in the most careful and balanced terms. That pressure grinds researchers down. They leave or avoid the subject, which is the aim of the critics. "We're one of the last ones standing in the mainstream," says Whitson.

Remaining in the mainstream is vital to HRW. While Roth stuck to his guns on Israel's "indiscriminate" bombings, and the organization repeatedly condemned Israel's use of cluster bombs in civilian areas, it also seemed to go out of its way toward the end of the war to blast both sides. The chariness alienated the international left. Roel Bramer, a Dutch-Canadian, resigned from the board of the Toronto chapter of HRW in August, saying its criticism of Israel was too tepid. In a resignation letter, Bramer wrote, "Ken [Roth] is quoted as stating that we abide by a 'fact/research-based application of international human rights and humanitarian law'" and criticize governments on human rights grounds, not political ones. "I feel that HRW should protest boldly and loudly against this borderline genocide and the calamitous rubble and grief Israel has left behind."

Roth does not appear to be too worried about his credibility on the left. He is much more concerned about the right, even if that means fielding arguments about whether the Bible is primitive. One board member, Shibley Telhami, an Arab-American who is sometimes enraged by Israel's actions, says engaging the pro-Israel community is vital to the organization's mission, and his own. "The *New York Sun* is framing HRW in a context that resonates with a community that's much broader.... What you have here is Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, within the American political mainstream, not just the Jewish groups, saying that this is about Israel's right to defend itself and let them finish the job. But you've got to connect, so you think, What is the best mix of effectiveness, credibility and principle? I struggle with that every day." PHILIP WEISS

Philip Weiss writes frequently for The Nation *about Middle East politics.*

CALVIN TRILLIN

THE CHOICE ON IRAQ

The choice this fall's about Iraq, Bush says.
He's right, but here's how Democrats should spin it:
To figure out the end of this grand mess,
Why keep the very clunks that got us in it?

Tavis Smiley's Covenant

One doesn't just read *The Covenant With Black America*. Rather, to read this nonfiction manifesto-cum-workbook is to become part of a multimedia movement aimed at increasing black political and economic power.

While it's hard to judge now whether this movement will have legs, the fact that the book hit the *New York Times* best-seller list in March and continues selling like hot cakes suggests that its message is striking a chord with lots of Americans. Its publisher, the Chicago-based Third World Press—the nation's largest independent black-owned press—has shipped more than

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Drugs, Dealers, Danger...Just a Click Away. Are You Watching Your Teens Online? ...*Who Is?*

The Internet unsupervised can be a world of temptation. Pushers peddling pills and make-it-yourself drug recipes. Dealers glorifying marijuana. Bogus "pharmacies" filling orders without prescriptions. "Friends" sending text or instant messages about which parties will have pot or alcohol.

With all the advantages they bring, these technologies, such as Web sites, blogs, spam and text messages, can also expose teens to threats like dangerous drugs and put them in contact with dealers or sexual predators. What can you do? More importantly, what should you do? Parents need to monitor their teens' activities and help them navigate the temptations in the digital world. Here's how:

Learn about the digital devices your teen uses. Visit his Web page or send a text message to her cell phone.

Be clear and consistent about what is off limits — including which Web sites, chat rooms, games or blogs — and how to handle information promoting drugs or sex. Discuss consequences for breaking these rules.

Use technology to help monitor your teen. See for yourself what's posted on social networking sites your teen visits by setting up your own account. Use text messaging to check in with your teen after school.

Know whom your teen is communicating with. Ask who is on his/her cell phone and instant message contact lists. Use every available opportunity to meet and get to know their friends and their parents.

Limit your teen's time spent online, and put computers in a common area of the house so you can more easily monitor their use.

Above all, don't feel uncomfortable with these tactics. You can do it. You're supposed to do it. Because you owe it to them. **For more e-monitoring tips and information on how to use technology to keep your teen drug-free, visit www.TheAntiDrug.com, or call 1-800-788-2800.**

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COMMENT

400,000 copies since its publication early this year.

The man responsible for editing *The Covenant* and masterminding its omnibus approach is Tavis Smiley, a self-described journalist-activist viewed by some as a brilliant, modern-day cross between Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King Jr., and by others as a self-promoter. Whatever the case—and both perceptions may be accurate—Smiley has perfected a linking of different media vehicles that is noteworthy: He hosts a two-hour weekly radio talk show; a half-hour late-night talk show; a popular website, tavistalks.com; and a vast public-speaking, book-publishing and foundation enterprise. "He is using the best of our new communication outlets to both energize and educate the community and is doing it in the King tradition. This is unprecedented," said Cornel West, professor of religion at Princeton and a frequent commentator on Smiley's nationally syndicated Public Radio International (PRI) talk program, *The Tavis Smiley Show*.

Reflecting perhaps Smiley's determined if peripatetic sensibility, *The Covenant* requires Dear Reader to exercise an interesting kind of cognitive double duty: While reading its brief essays by leading black scholars, activists and politicos (including West; former US Surgeon General David Satcher; and Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald, Southern regional director of the Children's Defense Fund) and its brief recommendations for activism, one is constantly aware of Smiley himself. Though his introduction to *The Covenant* is brief, Smiley reigns unmistakably throughout the text, hovering over the shoulder of each contributor.

In *The Covenant*'s bite-sized chapters, its checklists, its brief boldface subtitles, we get relentless if subtle reminders of Smiley's catch-all approach to Improving the Lot of Black Folk. As I reached its end, my overwhelming reaction was: *Whew. Thank goodness he's using his power for good.*

For the record, Smiley doesn't claim affiliation with any political party but says unequivocally that his worldview was shaped by the life, letters and work of Martin Luther King Jr.; moreover, during his long stint as a commentator on the wildly popular, nationally syndicated urban radio program *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, Smiley regularly covered progressive issues.

Then there are his philanthropic efforts, including a million-dollar endowment in 2004 for the journalism school at Texas Southern University, a historically black college. That gift was separate from Smiley's ongoing scholarships, which are funded in part by big corporations, and which provide modest, one-time scholarships to African-American high school students. His annual State of the Black Union conferences draw thousands of civic-minded audience members, and possibly a few million more via C-SPAN broadcasts. More than any other Smiley enterprise, the conferences have become high-profile extensions of Smiley's activism. And since their inception nearly a decade ago, these conferences have made it clear that political leaders see Smiley as a force to contend with. At this year's gathering in February in Houston, for example, Smiley read statements from Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean and Republican National Committee chair Ken Mehlman, in which both men essentially pledged on behalf of their respective parties to pay attention to the needs of black Americans.

The party chiefs' statements were greeted enthusiastically by the Houston audience, vocal evidence of Smiley's appeal to both establishment party leaders and the masses of black Americans they seek to reach. Further, at many of the stops on Smiley's twenty-city whistle-stop tour to promote *The Covenant* earlier this year, thousands of predominantly black audiences packed halls from Los Angeles to Washington to see Smiley, West and other *Covenant* contributors. Smiley's flood-the-zone promotional strategy, plugging the book on his website, in personal appearances and via the Tom Joyner radio show, helped push the book onto the *Times*'s bestseller list, a rare feat for a nonfiction book about black issues. In purely commercial terms, then, *The Covenant* seems to be a success.

What's not as clear is whether Smiley can turn the book, and his growing perceived political clout, into lasting on-the-ground action. When I phoned Smiley seeking answers, I got a call back from his publicist, a Hollywood veteran named David Brokaw, whose client list also includes Bill Cosby. Brokaw smoothly told me that the "operational phase" of *The Covenant* will be rolled out in the coming months. It involves a plan in which leaders of black churches, civic groups and advocacy organizations will begin carrying out *The Covenant*'s recommendations for increasing African-American political and economic power.

This plan ranges from urging people to take responsibility for improving their own and their family's lives and their communities through steps like eating healthier, refraining from drug and alcohol use and voting in every local and national election, to joining PTAs, police department citizen commissions and other official and quasi-official groups—all while pressing for accountability and changes that are in keeping with *The Covenant*'s goals.

All of this sounds strikingly similar to a "get involved" platform that you might hear from an ambitious novice City Council candidate. And yet it is tempting to believe that Smiley's media-honed cudgel—however narrowly focused thus far on blacks—may someday succeed where other, more traditional attempts to grow black political involvement have failed: Stephanie Robinson, president of the Jamestown Project, a Yale-affiliated nonprofit aimed at furthering democratic principles, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that she intends to lead a movement to get New Haven city officials to adopt *The Covenant*'s civic-improvement goals.

At the same time, for those of us who came of age after the civil rights movement, Smiley's showmanship can be a bit off-putting: It may be heretical to point out (and I do so at the risk of teeing off any number of Smiley loyalists) that the rhetorical hot air one is required to endure on the way to reaching Smiley's good-deeds message can be exhausting. Part of the bluster undoubtedly comes from Smiley's early exposure to the florid speech patterns of the Pentecostal churches in which he was raised. Growing up near Kokomo, Indiana, Smiley lived in a trailer with twelve other people, including several cousins adopted by the Smileys after their mother was killed. Led by his devoutly religious mother and adoptive father (Tavis's biological father didn't marry his mother), Smiley and his siblings spent a lot of time in the pews. Their father worked at a local Air Force base, but with so many mouths to feed, money was tight.

As described in his upcoming autobiography, *What I Know for*

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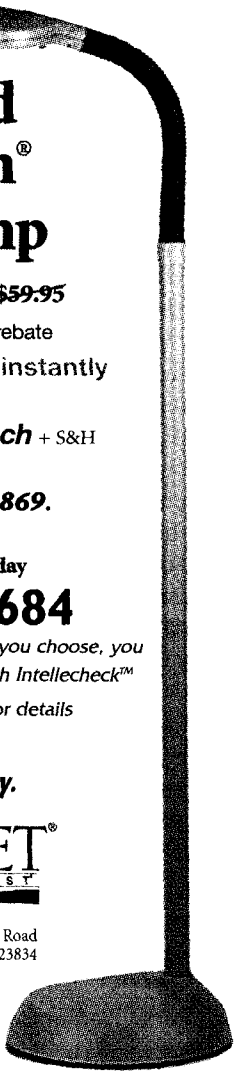

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COMMENT

Sure: My Story of Growing Up in America, the hellfire vehemence of Pentecostalism kept Smiley on the straight and narrow for most of his young life (he is now 42) and imbued in him an understanding of the power of language. After listening to hours and hours of speeches by King, having checked out stacks of recordings from the local library, Smiley writes, in his early teens he felt he'd found amid his family's threadbare Dickensian living conditions a guiding light.

These many years and many leaps up the economic ladder later, we hear in Smiley's speaking patterns the over-enunciations and rhetorical flourishes peculiar to black public speakers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When listening to his interviews, on his PBS talk show and especially on his PRI radio show, one often wishes he'd choose brevity over loquaciousness—and that he'd not pronounce the word "again" as a-*gain*.

Of course, these are stylistic quibbles, hardly worth mentioning—except they possibly hold the key to Smiley's relative invisibility on the Big East Coast Media radar. The *New York Times*, for example, has yet to publish a major in-depth look at Smiley and his many lucrative enterprises, despite *The Covenant*'s presence on its bestseller list. For all his ubiquity, it appears that Smiley exists everywhere and nowhere all at once, a modern-media paradox that I chalk up to the same old cultural myopia that has plagued mainstream American newsrooms for decades: If the prevailing establishment-media arbiters—the predominantly white, upper-middle-class book reviewers and film and media critics—don't consider black media personalities part of the mainstream, their lack of coverage creates a parallel universe in which even a "successful" black TV or radio host never manages to penetrate the center of the cultural zeitgeist.

Smiley's current radio show on PRI represents his determination to work around this dynamic: His first run as a national radio-show host, at National Public Radio, ended poorly nearly two years ago, and he admits in his autobiography to having displayed unhelpful bouts of egotism. Smiley also, though, takes NPR to task for failing to sufficiently promote the show in urban markets. His criticisms were disputed by NPR, but now, with the network engaged in a similar debate with Smiley's replacement, the veteran black broadcaster Ed Gordon, it's worth wondering if NPR is capable of offering more than window-dressing minority programming. In fairness to NPR, that same question, of course, can be asked of nearly all mainstream news organizations. Tavis Smiley may indeed be a new breed of journalist-activist, but he is also a bit too black for some mainstream media gatekeepers.

I give Smiley props for taking the onrushing, multi-platform-media bull by the horns and wrestling it into the service of blacks and other underrepresented Americans. And yes, it is satisfying to point out that even without getting onto the cover of *Time*, Smiley, with his adept cross-breeding and ownership of so many media outlets, puts even right-wing PT Barnums like Ann Coulter to shame. Given what he's already achieved, the best response to the question of *The Covenant*'s long-term influence seems to be: Stay tuned.

AMY ALEXANDER

Amy Alexander, co-author of Lay My Burden Down *(Beacon), is writing a book on race and the American press.*

No Rx in Massachusetts

Senator Ted Kennedy, Governor Mitt Romney, the medical establishment of Massachusetts and the state's consumer advocacy groups could hardly resist congratulating themselves on passing a new health insurance law this past spring—a so-called individual mandate requiring the uninsured to buy coverage from private carriers under penalty of paying higher income taxes if they don't. The media called the law a model for states to replicate and praised such diverse groups for coming together to solve a seemingly intractable problem. A headline in the *New York Times* proclaimed, A HEALTH FIX THAT IS NOT A FANTASY.

A close look, however, reveals that the new law may well be a fantasy and a triumph for special interest politics after all. "It's absolutely worthless," says Dr. Marcia Angell, former editor in chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and author of *The Truth About the Drug Companies*. "There *is* no magic in Massachusetts."

The law is yet another patchwork attempt to dodge the main obstacle to reform—a fundamental lack of agreement about equity in healthcare. Americans still don't share equity as a universal value, so every endeavor to cover more people results in a complicated, contorted and underfinanced scheme. Massachusetts's latest move is no exception. It pushes the country further away from national health insurance—with its essential ingredients of universal access, low administrative costs and limits on what medical providers can charge. Instead the law embodies much of the right's approach to health reform, which continues to make the world safe for big insurance, big hospitals, and Big Pharma while palming off on the working poor the task of covering themselves. Indeed, a document distributed by Romney's staff says the organizing principles of the new law are "a culture of insurance" and "personal responsibility"—exactly the opposite of what's needed if the United States is ever to join the rest of the world in providing medical coverage for all its people.

The law, on a speedy track for implementation next March, leaves the current dysfunctional system intact, tinkering around the edges with insurance market reform. In Massachusetts that means, among other things, no new coverage mandates for two years, merging the individual and small-group markets to enlarge the risk pool and encouraging more policies with health savings accounts—not what people need for really good coverage. The core of American health insurance—the principle of letting private carriers select those they will insure—is firmly in place. Advocacy groups signed on believing that more people would be covered, that the state would make sure insurance was affordable and that compromise would move the debate forward.

Hospitals and employers emerged in fine shape too. Hospitals will receive about $500 million in higher Medicaid payments and a new revenue stream—in effect, they will be freed from the burden of offering charity care to the poor, who will now have insurance to pay their bills. Employers escaped without swallowing an employer mandate; that is, a requirement to cover all their workers. Those with eleven or more employees who fail to offer

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insurance will be assessed $295 per worker per year—a pittance compared with what they would have had to pay for real insurance, estimated by Hewitt Associates, a benefits consulting firm, to be about $9,000 per worker in 2006. For employers, the puny assessment was a far better deal than a real mandate, which had been headed for a ballot initiative this fall.

Rather than force employers who have deeper pockets to pay for coverage, the law requires the state's 550,000 uninsured to come up with the money. Recognizing that Massachusetts has the costliest medical care in the country—spending $9,200 per person, compared with the national average of $7,250—the legislature created an elaborate mechanism of subsidies to help the poorest folks, an arrangement the governor's press materials call a "glide-path to self sufficiency." For individuals with incomes at the poverty level, about $10,000 ($20,000 for a family of four), the state subsidy will cover all the cost; for single people with incomes between $10,000 and $30,000, it will cover some of the cost, more for those at the low end. Those with incomes greater than $30,000 will be on their own and subject to tax penalties if they don't spring for a policy.

It will be up to a new, $25 million quasi-state agency, the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector, a concept born at the Heritage Foundation, to certify whether new policies—likely with very high deductibles, high cost sharing and less comprehensive benefits—will be affordable and who can afford them. Determining affordability will be a difficult, politically charged job in a climate where there are more doctors per person than the national average and the state's hospitals spend 44 percent more on care than the national average. "The affordability standard is the most fragile part of the legislation. We don't know to whom it will apply," admits Nancy Turnbull, president of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. (Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Partners HealthCare, a big hospital system, paid for a report by the Urban Institute, a Washington, DC, think tank, which became the road map for the new law.)

Imagine the shock to a worker at a Rockport clam shack when he realizes that his taxes are going up because he can't afford the state's "affordable" policy. The law does provide for appeal rights and a waiver of the penalty if people can prove that buying a policy is a financial burden. (Imagine the new bureaucracy and costs *that* will entail.)

Money for the estimated $725 million in subsidies needed by the third year comes mostly from federal funds available through the state's Medicaid waiver. These waivers, available to all states, allow them to expand coverage by leveraging Medicaid dollars. Besides the federal dollars, Massachusetts expects to cover the subsidies with money redirected from the state's uncompensated care fund, which pays hospitals for serving the uninsured; $125 million in new funds from general revenues; and the new assessment on employers. That may not be enough. A House-Senate conference committee report projects a deficit of $162 million by the third year. Even John McDonough, executive director of Health Care For All, a strong supporter of the new law, worries about future funding. "At some point the program will require additional infusions of money to meet its promise," he says.

Where that money will come from is unclear. Relying on Medicaid is dicey; the state's Medicaid waiver expires in two years. The employer assessment may not stick. Romney vetoed the provision once, but the legislature overturned the veto. And there's virtually nothing in the law that will stem the rising cost of care, the greatest threat to the program. A new report by health policy researchers at Boston University shows that the state's healthcare costs will exceed $62 billion this year, one-third above the national average. "Without cost control, they are bringing the uninsured into the same mess that the rest of us are in," says Dr. Mark Chassin, executive vice president at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York.

Instead of strong cost controls, which would have kept the hospitals and insurance companies from agreeing to the bill, the law bets on market competition to bring down the price of medical care and thus the cost of insurance. It sets up a plan for collecting price information and data about quality of services so patients can become wise shoppers, and it contemplates that the new affordable policies with their higher deductibles and co-insurance will make people think twice about using medical services—approaches that don't touch the use of unproven technology, a major culprit in healthcare inflation. The law also envisions electronic medical records and computerized physician order systems in hospitals to address the cost problem. These may make healthcare safer, but the payoff on the cost side is a long way off, if it comes at all.

Massachusetts led the way in healthcare reform once before, by passing a reasonable employer mandate in 1988 during the Dukakis Administration. The plan, which would have required employers to pay nearly $2,000 per worker each year for coverage, went nowhere in the state but later became a model for Clinton's pay-or-play plan. The state's individual mandate may suffer the same fate. If it becomes a national model, American healthcare, already on life support, will take a turn for the worse.

TRUDY LIEBERMAN

Trudy Lieberman writes about healthcare for The Nation.

NATION NOTES

Welcome back, New Orleans! Our circulation department reports that as of about a month ago, all of our more than 500 subscribers in New Orleans and the immediate vicinity have again been able to receive mail. For anyone still in the diaspora, let us know, if you haven't already, your temporary address.

* * *

ON THE WEB: Peter Rothberg lists an array of grassroots resources to help New Orleans recover. NPR's Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, *aka* the Kitchen Sisters, explore how America's hidden kitchens create real community. Representative Barney Frank speaks out on presidential abuse of power. David Enders reports from Lebanon on Hezbollah's growing cachet as villagers return to their ruined homes (www.thenation.com).

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ERIC ALTERMAN

All Governments (and Some Journalists) Lie

It's a truism that once an accusation is leveled, it's impossible to erase entirely from the public memory. This is doubly true when it comes to the deceased, and doubly dangerous in our political world, in which debate is driven by cable news networks that show little interest in quaint questions involving what's actually true. The only apparent standard is what's actionable—or what's going to piss off the network brass. Given the fact that most casual news consumers cannot be expected to sift through competing claims of evidence and the like, the media's disregard for traditional standards of verification is one of the right wing's most potent weapons.

Take as a case in point the accusations that have floated around for more than a decade against the late left-wing journalist (and Washington editor of this magazine) I.F. "Izzy" Stone. In her new biography, *All Governments Lie!*, journalist Myra MacPherson compares two sets of KGB memos by a Russian secret agent code-named "Sergei," written in the summer and autumn of 1944, as the American and Russian armies were racing each other toward Berlin. One set described a series of conversations with a journalist code-named "I." It contained all manner of detailed discussion about US strategy and speculations about how it would affect the USSR. Tempted as one might be to imagine that "I" stood for "I.F.," alas, it stood for "Imperialism," and the FBI concluded that it was none other than that well-known commie spy Walter Lippmann. Next, MacPherson examines a second set of memos by Sergei—*a k a* TASS reporter Vladimir Pravdin—in which he tries and eventually succeeds in lunching with a journalist code-named "Blin/Pancake." The FBI decided in 1952 that the latter "appears" to be Stone.

The brouhaha around Stone's alleged activities as a Soviet spy arose in 1992 and was based almost entirely on a misstatement by a former Soviet agent named Oleg Kalugin, terming Stone "an agent," which was then reported in an extremely confused fashion by the London *Independent*. My colleague Don Guttenplan and I spoke, separately, to Kalugin afterward and clarified the fact that Stone was not "an agent" but rather a journalist who, like Lippmann—and any number of journalists—met with the local TASS reporter and swapped opinions. No classified information was ever broached. No money was ever passed. Izzy would not even let the guy pay for lunch. As MacPherson writes, "First, Stone never had access to classified secrets to barter. Second, journalists naturally sought information about Russia from a TASS correspondent, Pravdin's official role. And as files reveal, Lippmann told far more than Stone ever did in meetings with Pravdin." Despite continuous FBI surveillance of Stone's daily activities and a dogged desire by J. Edgar Hoover to nail him for something, not a single shred of evidence ever emerged to support any spy allegations against him.

Stone died in 1989 at age 81, but the smear never has. The leaders of this campaign have been the professionally paranoid red-hunter Herbert Romerstein, the comically misnamed "Accuracy in Media," wind-up shrieking doll Ann Coulter and, most tellingly, Robert Novak. The last is, of course, both a respected member of the Washington journalistic establishment and, as everyone who has followed the Joe Wilson/Valerie Plame case is well aware, a man who will give away national security secrets to America's enemies when it suits his own ideological purposes.

Novak has been peddling the phony Stone story for more than a decade now. When I appeared on CNN's *Crossfire* with him fourteen years ago, he raised it in order to smear my work and my reputation (Stone was my friend and journalistic mentor during his last decade). Following the show, I wrote a letter to then–CNN president Tom Johnson asking for the record to be corrected but received no response. I've tried a few more times to force the issue with Novak, but he has run away from every appearance. And the slander continues. When John Edwards spoke of Stone's *Trial of Socrates* during the 2004 presidential campaign, Novak fulminated on CNN that this was an outrage, as "Stone received secret payments from the Kremlin." Again, CNN did not bother with a rebuttal, much less a correction.

Since we now know that Novak is willing to blow the cover of a CIA agent and potentially endanger the lives and operations of those she was involved with, the smear campaign against Stone is thick with irony. This is, after all, exactly the crime of which Communist spies—both real and alleged—were accused. But not even Novak's undeniable guilt in the matter has affected his status as an insider in good standing.

A few voices—mostly on the liberal margins—called on CNN and the *Washington Post* to fire or at least rebuke Novak. Both refused, with CNN allowing him to decamp to Fox only after he lost his cool, saying "Bullshit" on the air and storming off. Speaking of bullshit, this is the same Robert Novak CNN star anchor Wolf Blitzer praised as "one of the best reporters in the business" *after* Novak's Wilson/Plame role was revealed.

One could say much the same about Ann Coulter, who has been exposed as a fabulist and fabricator so many times she deserves to have a wing named after her in the Liars and Lunatics' Hall of Fame (as soon as one is built). She somehow claims that Stone's career as "a paid Soviet agent" is not only "overwhelmingly documented" but also "confirmed" in "declassified Soviet cables." For such pathetic performances, she is praised by MSNBC's Chris Matthews as "brilliant" and invited to lie without challenge as frequently as she likes on his show. Remember, this is not Fox—it's CNN and MSNBC.

It may be true, as Stone said, that "all governments lie," but democracy cannot function if journalists do too. This is why the success of liars like Novak and Coulter at the center of our political culture is a greater danger to America than a truck full of terrorists bent on doing us harm. ■

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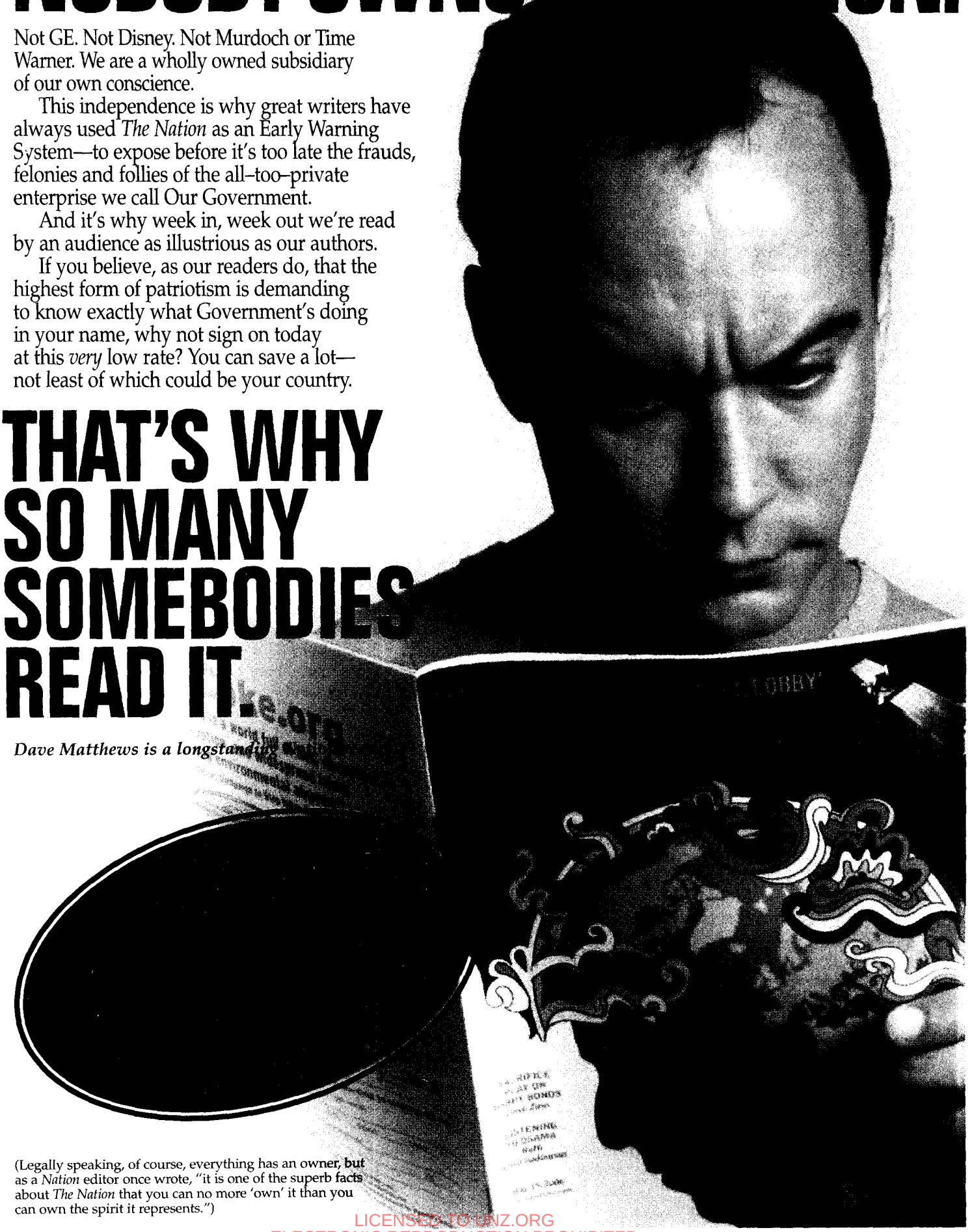

Dave Matthews is a longstanding

(Legally speaking, of course, everything has an owner, but as a *Nation* editor once wrote, "it is one of the superb facts about *The Nation* that you can no more 'own' it than you can own the spirit it represents.")

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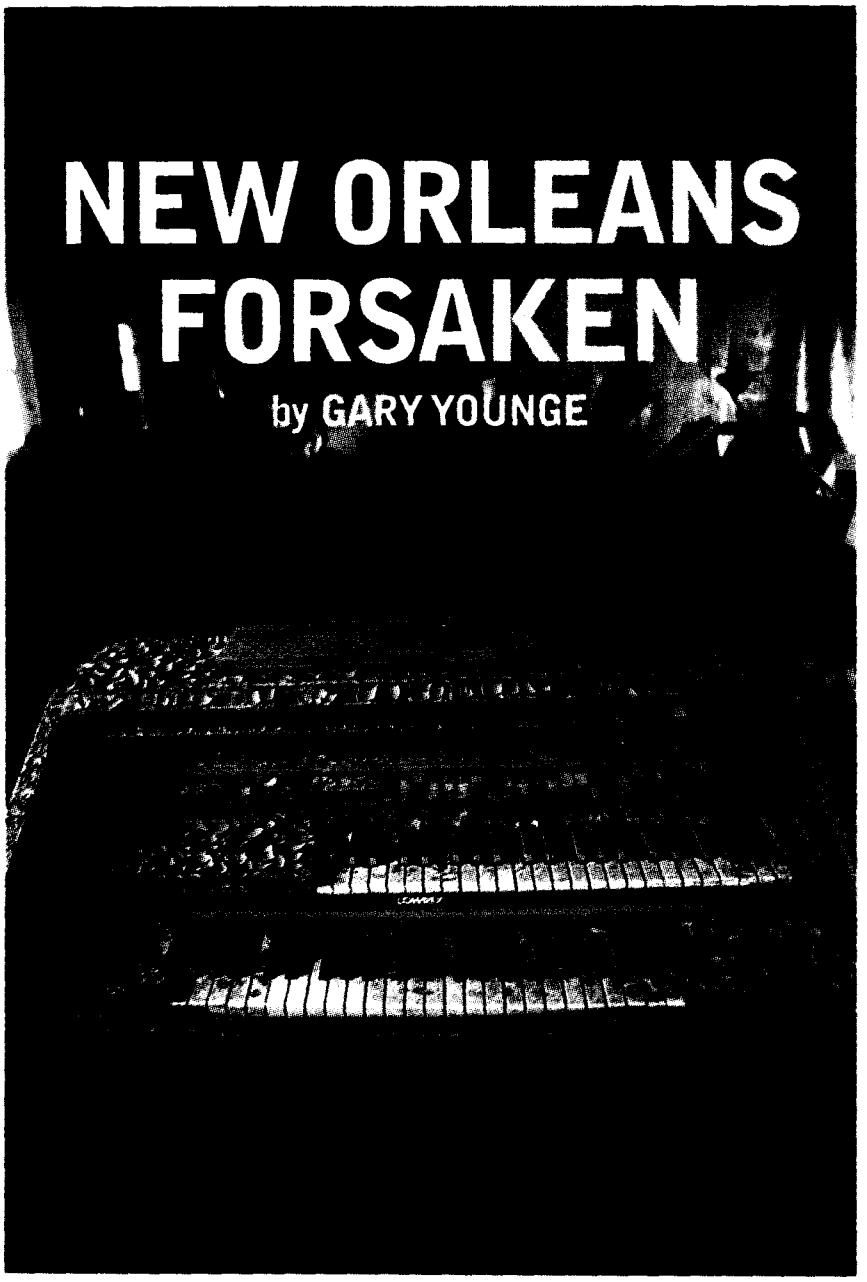
ARTICLES

NEW ORLEANS FORSAKEN

by GARY YOUNGE



"We are what we pretend to be," said Kurt Vonnegut. "So we must be careful what we pretend to be." Up until late August of last year, the United States pretended to be the leader of the Free World—a nation that derived its leadership from its military power and derived its freedom from its meritocratic impulses. Indeed, the two were interlinked. Everyone who worked hard enough could get on here; that was not just the philosophy that made America what it was but the basic worldview worth exporting at the barrel of a gun, if necessary. Then came Katrina. And for a short moment, the pretense was over.

When the levees were breached, Lake Pontchartrain poured into the bowl of New Orleans and washed up the America that most Americans had tried to forget. Like Rodney King, Katrina told truths that were both long known and long denied and put them on prime time. This was reality TV at its most compelling and sickening. To be in the Crescent City the week after was to see what Haiti would look like with skyscrapers—the appearance of wealth, power and order towering over the reality of poverty, helplessness and chaos. America clearly did not have to go abroad to find the developing world, let alone fight it. It was right here. Rates of black infant mortality in Louisiana are on a par with those of Sri Lanka; black male life expectancy is the same as for men in Kyrgyzstan.

In many ways these scenes were far more ruinous to America's international reputation than the debacle in Iraq. Anyone with a television, from Jamaica to Jakarta, got a ringside seat on the reality behind the rhetoric of freedom the Bush Administration sought to impose internationally at the barrel of a gun. A nation where people died in the street for lack of basic food, water and medical services without the removal of corpses for weeks and even months had abdicated its authority to lecture the rest of the world on how to run their affairs.

Scandalized by incompetence at every level of government and indifference at the highest levels, the nation turned its ire on the White House. This was entirely logical. Katrina was an act of nature. But almost everything that happened both before and after was an act of neglect. Not benign neglect—the careless omission of deeds by people too busy to do otherwise—but malign: the willful disregard for environment and infrastructure over several decades because the state did not care to act otherwise.

The episode exemplified all the ills of the Bush Administration. Poverty, racism, cronyism, underinvestment, inequality, militarism, ineptitude, dissembling, sectarianism, cynicism and callousness—all the hallmarks of Bush's tenure—were on display. As the year continued, immigration, corporate welfare, democratic deficits and gentrification would be added to the list.

The light that Katrina shone on American reality burned brightly and petered out quickly. Bush was a legitimate target,

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but he was also a convenient one. His policies had accentuated America's fault lines but they had not created them. Katrina revealed the problems with his Administration. But the past year has also exposed the left's inability to formulate a coherent progressive agenda in response, galvanize a constituency for it and then sustain a campaign around it.

To truly grasp how events in New Orleans unraveled, America would have to grapple with its ahistorical understanding of race, ambivalence toward class and antagonism toward government. But those rabbit holes proved too deep and too ugly, and in the end it was a journey the country had neither the will, curiosity nor leadership to make.

Katrina revealed the need to examine the relationship between the private and the public and the responsibilities of the individual to the collective. It exposed the legacy of segregation, the prevalence of class inequality and the necessity of government. It is a mark of the country's dysfunctional political culture that just ten months earlier, none of the key issues raised by Katrina had featured in a hotly contested presidential election in which the nation's future was reputedly at stake.

The anger was there, but with no movement to harness it or ideology to advance it, the fury burned bright but fizzled quickly.

Nonetheless, the hurricane represented a crucial political moment. With no foreign enemy to deflect attention from his shortcomings—for all her faults, and there were many, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco was no Osama bin Laden—the spotlight was on Bush. And people didn't like what they saw. Katrina became a signifier for an Administration that was heartless and clueless. The poor of New Orleans were left to sink or swim in no small part because the MBA President was out of his depth.

Neither the hurricane nor its likely effects were a surprise. In 2001 a Federal Emergency Management Agency report ranked a major hurricane striking New Orleans as one of the three most likely potential disasters—after a terrorist attack on New York City and an earthquake in San Francisco. Like the infamous presidential daily briefing of August 6, 2001, titled "Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US," Bush failed to heed the warnings and then pretended he had never even heard them. Moreover, unlike September 11, with Katrina he knew the approximate time and place disaster would strike. Not for the first time, he was missing in action. And while the Gulf Coast lay in ruins, he remained in Southern California trying to sell the Gulf War.

Bush's ability to export freedom to the Middle East was brought into question by his inability to deliver food to Middle America. For the first time in his presidency, a narrow majority of people did not believe Bush was a strong and decisive leader. His approval ratings sank below 40 percent, and they have barely recovered.

This moment showed potential to raise the level of political discourse beyond flag, faith, soundbite and photo op. For a few weeks, issues of race, class privilege and poverty, which were once rarely discussed beyond the margins, became mainstream. With no government with which to be embedded, even the lame media learned to walk the walk again. Their powers of inquiry and capacity for indignation were reborn. Cameras that remained shuttered as coffins returned home from Iraq tracked bodies floating down Canal Street. Just a few weeks after the hurricane, *Newsweek* ran a cover story titled "Poverty, Race and Katrina," as though the magazine had only just discovered it.

But with a few notable exceptions, the media soon left town and would not return in substantial numbers until Mardi Gras. Without any viable political expression to sustain it, the well of human compassion ran dry. The anger was there, but with no movement to harness it or ideology to advance it, the fury burned bright but fizzled quickly.

Clearly feeling the pressure, Bush delivered a prime-time speech from New Orleans's Jackson Square just over two weeks after Katrina struck. "All of us saw on television, there's...some deep, persistent poverty in this region," he said. "That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action." But as the pressure waned, so did his interest in the issue. Over the next ten months Bush would mention domestic poverty only six times. "Does he often talk about poverty? No," his press secretary, Tony Snow, told the *Washington Post*. "He is focused on eliminating the barriers that stand in the way of people making progress."

Pretense was back in vogue. Whites pretended that racism played no part in the debacle, with only 12 percent accepting that race played a factor in the slow response, according to a CNN poll two weeks after the hurricane. The proportion of African-Americans who felt it had been a factor was five times higher. The last time the nation had seen the same event and reached such entirely opposite conclusions on grounds of race was the O.J. Simpson trial.

That anyone could have witnessed the scenes outside the Superdome and Convention Center and think race did not play a part speaks to the level of denial that remains among white Americans and to the persistence and prevalence of racism. Katrina charted a path from the subtle and undramatic institutional racism that has become entrenched at every level of American society to its most crude and devastating consequences—destruction, displacement and death.

For some whites it was too subtle. In this New South, black demands for full citizenship fell foul not of the law of the land but of the law of probability. African-Americans were more likely to be flooded, more likely to be displaced, less likely to be able to return and, when the mayoral elections were held this past spring, less likely to be able to vote.

That race was a factor is beyond question—in a Southern city just fifty-one years after integration became law and forty years after the Voting Rights Act, race is a factor in almost

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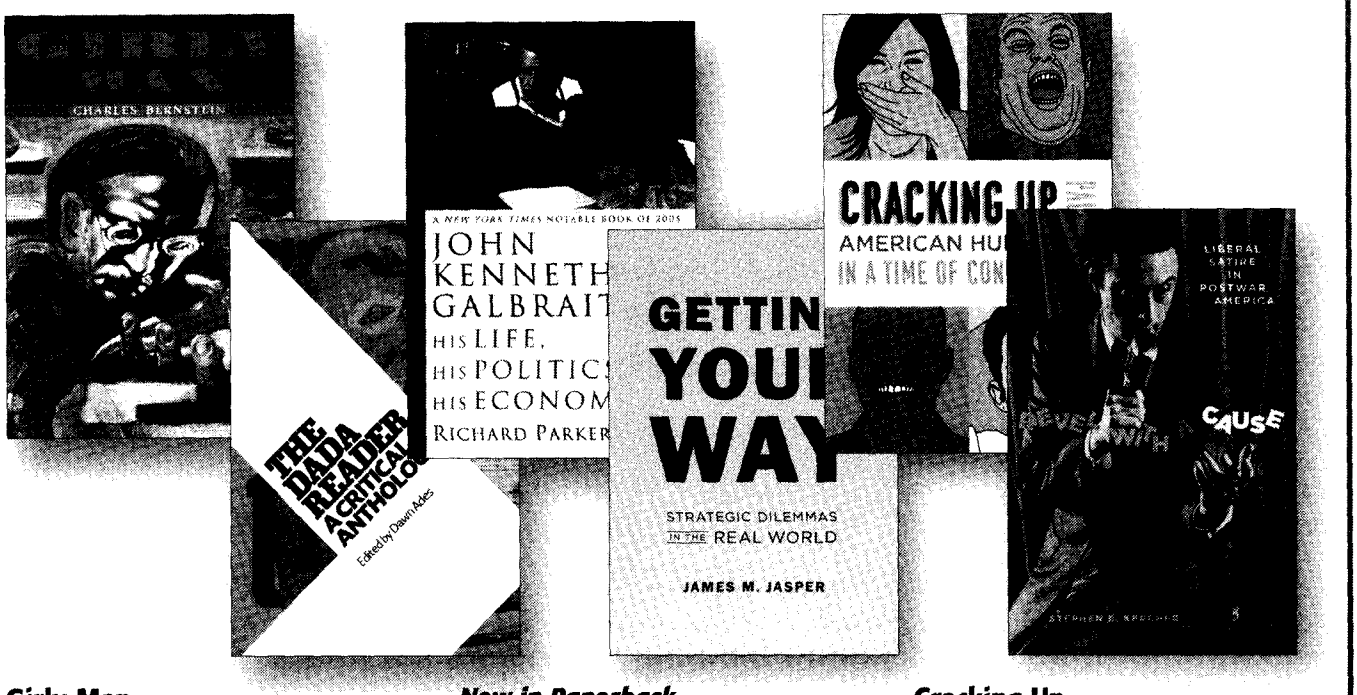

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everything. Yet to attribute the discrepancy between black and white attitudes entirely to racism is as legitimate and convenient as to blame the Bush Administration for the whole fiasco. To do so would misunderstand race not as the starting point from which to engage with broader issues but as the end point to which all problems affecting African-Americans inevitably lead. Such an approach not only allows whites, even those who are poor, to disregard every issue apparently pertaining to blacks as a discrete problem borne from race. It also has crippled the left in any bid to make connections between African-Americans and others on grounds of class, gender, sexual orientation or almost anything else that might overcome this antipathy.

So while race was clearly a factor, it was not the only factor, or even the dominant one. Those African-Americans with money could leave, and most did. Those without could not.

While race was clearly a factor, it was not the only factor.... Those African-Americans with money could leave, and most did.

A basic understanding of human nature suggests that nearly everyone in New Orleans wanted to escape Katrina and survive. A basic understanding of American economics and history shows that, despite all the rhetoric, wealth—not hard work or personal sacrifice—is the most decisive factor in determining who succeeds.

In a nation that prides itself on taut bootstraps and rugged individualism, these axioms strike at the heart of one of America's great taboos—class. Those who could not get out after the storm were the same ones who could not get on before it. Katrina arrived at the end of the month and some were waiting to get paid. One in four in New Orleans did not have a car, yet there was no public transportation out of the city. Even if they did have a car, they needed money to fill it up with gas and for a motel at the end of the trip. Of those who had the choice, many among the old and infirm and those who cared for them preferred to take the risk with the hurricane than to endure the certain discomfort of sitting in traffic for hours and then trying to find somewhere to stay.

The inability of the poor to leave New Orleans reflected not just a lack of geographical mobility but of social mobility. Far from denying the importance of race, this enriches our understanding of the various elements that might inform it at different times. Race and class in this respect are not contradictory and antagonistic but complementary and symbiotic—so closely intertwined that to try to understand either separately is to misunderstand both entirely.

In the absence of any progressive political leadership, the scope for broadening the national conversation that would make those connections was limited, to say the least. By the time of the runoff for the mayoral election in May, race had been eviscerated of substance in New Orleans politics and had taken on a purely symbolic importance. The election pitted Ray Nagin—once nicknamed Ray Reagan—against Mitch Landrieu, brother of Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu and son of Moon Landrieu, the last white mayor of the city. With little to choose between the two where policy and vision were concerned—neither had any—the contest became a battle between melanin content and family ties.

Melanin won. Nagin, who delayed ordering mandatory evacuation until it was too late, for fear that business would sue him for loss of trade, was back in office. It is clear how this benefited him; it is doubtful that it will improve the lives of African-Americans in New Orleans.

So when the venting was done, the right pushed ahead with its agenda to rebuild the city in its own image—an accelerated version of the gentrification patterns taking place in cities throughout the country that would make it whiter and wealthier.

The "new" New Orleans the right had in mind would be free of drugs, crime and poverty, not because the root causes of those problems were to be eradicated but because the communities from which they came were to be eliminated. "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans," said Republican Congressman Richard Baker from Baton Rouge less than two weeks after the storm, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "We couldn't do it, but God did."

Katrina presented a chance to reshape the political, social and economic nature of the city. Before long Bechtel, Fluor, Shaw and Halliburton were in town both literally and metaphorically cleaning up. According to census figures published in June, the black population of the New Orleans metropolitan area had fallen by 42 percent in the nine months after the hurricane; meanwhile, the median household income rose by 9 percent.

While African-Americans emigrated, Latinos immigrated. The city's Hispanic population ballooned from 3 percent to more than 20 percent in the few months after the storm. Every morning at Lee Circle, hundreds of day laborers gathered under the watchful eye of the Confederate general and waited for work. Every night thousands slept in a tent city in City Park, Scout Island, where one standpipe and three toilets served several hundred people. Even as the xenophobic right called for mass deportation of undocumented workers, the nation's most vital reconstruction project was being undertaken primarily by migrant workers, many of them undocumented.

But if there has been one thing more amazing than how New Orleans has changed over the past year, it is how much it has stayed the same. We're more than halfway through this year's hurricane season, yet it's an open question whether the city is any better prepared. The postman returned to his rounds in the Lower Ninth Ward, which was 98 percent black, only in July; he found that many addresses no longer had houses and that many houses still had no doors. I drove through the Lower Ninth in May with Antoinette K-Doe in the hearse she bought when she evacuated to North Carolina; she kept stopping and staring at the post-apocalyptic sight of the neighborhood where she grew up. It looked as if Katrina had arrived just a week earlier: Whole houses had been washed off their moorings and into the road; cars had been washed into the houses; trees had been blown onto cars. And there they were still. "We're the richest country in the world," K-Doe said. "I don't understand how we can't fix this up." ■

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NEW ORLEANS ACTIVISTS HAVE HAD TO SPEND MOST OF THEIR ENERGY ON DEFENSE—PROTECTING EXILES' RIGHT TO RETURN AND FIGHTING OFF PLANS TO REMAKE THE CITY.

KAREN CALDICOTT

Grassroots Gumbo

CHRIS KROMM

New Orleans

Reverend Luke Nguyen is hastily stuffing a white cleric's collar around his neck as our car edges closer to his latest nemesis. "They don't like it when I come here," he says, pointing to the looming gates of the Chef Menteur Landfill—a sprawling waste site buried in mountains of hurricane debris. Father Luke has been battling the dangerous, unlined dump from the day it opened near his Village de l'Est neighborhood in New Orleans East in February, and he's braced for another standoff.

The security guard takes one look at the feisty priest and quickly retreats. Father Luke shrugs; city officials have been backing down ever since he began leading thousands of Vietnamese residents back to rebuild east New Orleans—the last area to dry after Katrina's floods—a month after the storm.

"I came back on October 2 with a permit; then the second week a few of us came back to live," Father Luke remembers back at the rectory of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church. "On the third weekend of October 2,000 parishioners came to mass, with no lights. We served 3,500 egg rolls. That's how you get people to come back."

Getting people back, he declines to mention, also meant breaking the law. The resettlement of New Orleans East was civil disobedience, a mass act of defiance against Mayor Ray Nagin's orders barring residents from returning to great stretches of the city. But the fishers, factory workers and grocery owners of Village de l'Est came back anyway, 3,000 in all—and, without fanfare, the city caved. Water and power lines were rebuilt, schools have been rehabbed and planners are now finishing blueprints to revive the two-block business district, for the Mayor's review.

Chris Kromm, executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies, is the coordinator of Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch (www.reconstructionwatch.org).

Few places devastated by Hurricane Katrina have a success story to tell like the tightly knit Vietnamese community of New Orleans East. But in many ways, Father Luke and the outlaws of Village de l'Est symbolize a gritty, grassroots movement that has grown and spread throughout the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina.

It's a movement without the luxury of high expectations. Many of its people are still deeply wounded by loss, in a place where people's patience is fraying or gone (a mood expressed in New Orleans by the recent rise of racist graffiti and bumper stickers, like GO BACK TO HOUSTON). The lives of many Katrina activists are tied up with day-to-day struggles for survival, recovery and dignity, while they strive to keep their eyes on the prize of justice for all. They've been blown apart from each other, with more than 200,000 evacuees still scattered across the nation.

But the Katrina movement has also scored surprising victories, even if it has had to settle for merely derailing the worst of what New Orleans writer Jordan Flaherty calls the "orgy of greed and opportunism" unleashed by the storms. It has also inspired ordinary people to become extraordinary leaders, and awakened a new generation of activists in the South and beyond.

"Y'all know who you are." Khalil Tian Shahyd, a New Orleans native and graduate student back in town to work for the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition, is staring down a few squirming members of the audience. We're at a neighborhood planning forum in June, a free-for-all assembly at the dingy Musician's Union Hall. Shahyd wants people to face the elephant in the room: the fact that nearly half the city is still in exile. "You have no right to be planning for neighborhoods when most of those people can't get back home," Shahyd berates the crowd. "There's no way to justify this—morally, ethically, any way."

The right to return for the displaced has been at the heart of the Katrina movement's agenda since day one, when it became clear that a toxic gumbo of political and corporate

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agendas—leavened with staggering official incompetence—would prevent many from making it back.

Here in New Orleans, it's also the issue where activists won their most impressive early victories. The first was convincing Mayor Nagin to shelve the rebuilding plans of his own Bring New Orleans Back commission, unveiled by the pro-developer Urban Land Institute in November [see Mike Davis, "Who Is Killing New Orleans?" April 10]. Ignoring that a future storm could ravage practically any part of New Orleans, the ULI proposed that only the poorer, blacker neighborhoods be written off and planted over so the city might have a "smaller footprint."

"Over my dead body," said Carolyn Parker of the Lower Ninth Ward, echoing a backlash that exploded at city forums and evacuee town meetings nationwide. Nagin grew more nervous as another front opened on the right to return: the burgeoning "stop the bulldozers" movement. Led by the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, ACORN and other community groups, along with allies at the Loyola Law Clinic and the Advancement Project in Washington, DC, by January they had physically blocked a demolition in the Lower Ninth and won an injunction to save more than 2,500 homes from being flattened without notification of the owners.

The revolt soon spread to public housing. Even though most of the city's 38,000 public rental units were only lightly damaged, officials spent $1.5 million to barricade the developments and keep the working poor at bay. But groups like N.O. H.E.A.T. and C3/Hands Off Iberville worked to get residents back into the Iberville development—long coveted by the lords of real estate thanks to its proximity to the French Quarter—before the city could stop them.

The uprisings not only temporarily scuttled the developer agenda, it also helped change the political course of New Orleans. With the African-American vote shrinking, the mildly liberal Mitch Landrieu seemed destined to become the first white mayor since 1979. But Nagin, in part by rejecting plans to level black neighborhoods, won 80 percent of black voters, who were mobilized and bused in by the Jeremiah Project, NAACP, ACORN and others. "I'm no fan of Nagin; he's in the pocket of the folks with money," one woman said. "But I'll be damned if we'll let them take over"—"them" being the downtown elite who seemed a bit too excited over prospects of a "whiter, lighter city."

But the right to return is about more than just housing; the displaced—especially families—face obstacles at every turn. Hospitals are still closed, only fifty-seven of 117 city schools will open this fall, daycare centers are almost nonexistent. Sixty percent of city establishments still don't receive electricity. For many, coming home is a fading dream. "We care about the right to return," says Pam Broom, who was displaced to Atlanta, then Durham, North Carolina. "But now, we're just trying to make community wherever we are."

The irony is that, just as many of Katrina's displaced are moving on, grassroots voices may finally be poised to have a say in the city's future. Thanks to community pressure—and the promise of $3.5 million from the Rockefeller Foundation—in July the city created a Unified New Orleans Plan, which teams up neighborhood groups with expert planners in a bottom-up process of rebuilding. At the eleventh hour, ACORN applied to

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be recognized as a planner group, and succeeded—a big step up from blocking bulldozers. "Now we're at the table," says ACORN founder Wade Rathke, based in New Orleans. "We're now in a position to help hundreds of people who want to get back into their neighborhoods."

Khalil Tian Shahyd insists that a plan that doesn't include the displaced from the beginning is fatally flawed. He gives an example: "Residents haven't been allowed back to Lafitte public housing, but it's at the center of a plan called the 'Lafitte Corridor Development,' where the city wants to sell property to movie studio complexes." Such rebuilding without representation would be especially tragic at Lafitte, he says, "the center of black Mardi Gras." But Shahyd, who spent a semester observing community-led planning in Kerala, India, believes that if people are brought back home, the process could be a way to engage ordinary New Orleanians in the decisions that affect

Don't Mourn, Link

By the first week of September 2005, New Orleans was in effect a virtual city. Most phones, cell and otherwise, were useless; only e-mails brought news to and from evacuees. Instead of neighborhoods, there were neighborhood forums on the *Times-Picayune*'s website, for those trying to locate relatives and friends.

By then, activists had also discovered that the Internet was the only way to send and receive reliable information about what was happening on the ground in New Orleans. First-person accounts of the flood and its aftermath began circulating widely, including "This is Criminal," written by former Black Panther Malik Rahim, as well as a detailed account of a blockade that prevented New Orleanians from crossing to safety over a Mississippi River bridge, first posted by Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky on the *Socialist Worker* website.

A year later, the Internet remains a crucial link in the effort to rebuild New Orleans and its communities. "The Internet is now used like a telephone tree," says Greg Peters, a Lafayette, Louisiana–based cartoonist and blogger who last fall helped evacuees access computers in that city's Cajundome shelter. "When someone finds out about some hastily called planning meeting, they alert everyone through the blogs and get a crowd there to see what's going on."

After posting "This is Criminal," Rahim relied on the Internet to raise funds and contact volunteers for the new Common Ground Collective, a community-based relief organization. Greg Griffith now works as legal liaison for the Common Ground Health Clinic; he recalls how he had just started fall classes at Kent State University in Ohio when he learned about Common Ground. He withdrew from his classes and went to New Orleans. "The good stuff, the grassroots efforts, you had to learn about online," he recalls.

New Orleanian Sandy Rosenthal was living in Lafayette, Louisiana, after evacuating from New Orleans when she founded the organization Levees.org; her 15-year-old son acted as webmaster. This summer Levees.org used e-mail alerts to generate more than 9,000 letters urging Congress to acknowledge that massive engineering mistakes by the Army Corps of Engineers led to the flooding of New Orleans. Levees.org's campaigns played a significant role in the recent passing of the Feingold-McCain amendment to the Water Resources Development Act of 2006, which created an independent peer-review process for Army Corps projects. "When we started, I wasn't in my home, and all I had was a computer and a cell phone. The Internet was the only way we could have done what we did," Rosenthal says.

One year after Katrina, more than a hundred local blogs now provide on-the-ground reports, photos and videos from New Orleans. Many are written by bloggers who go online in the off hours between gutting their houses and fighting with their insurance adjusters. Most bloggers say their primary duty is to counter prevailing myths: that the flood was a natural disaster, not an engineering debacle; that the city lies so far below sea level that it's not worth rebuilding; that people in New Orleans are now doing just fine and have adequate federal assistance.

"G Bitch," who blogs anonymously, is one of the few African-American bloggers in the city. "Just by looking at the flood patterns, I knew there were few people in the black middle class in New Orleans who could go online at that time," says the New Orleans native and college composition teacher, who started her blog in January 2006, and who says she doesn't want to reveal her identity publicly because she sometimes writes about her employer. "It's important to keep reminding the nurses, the teachers, the social workers and everyone else who is scattered that they are important and that they have a right to a place in the city."

For the Katrina anniversary, Mark Moseley, who posts on his own "Your Right Hand Thief" blog, helped organize a first-ever conference for New Orleans bloggers. The Rising Tide Conference (risingtidenola.com) took place August 25–27 at local sites, including the New Orleans Yacht Club, a once-flooded facility chosen in part because it was a contact point for evacuees during the disaster. A day of panels was followed by a day of salvage recovery work that brought bloggers together with the Arabi Wrecking Krewe, which guts houses for members of the local music community. The work in the mold-infested structure gave conference participants a chance to "smell it, feel it, taste it," says Moseley, who hopes the conference will help deepen connections among bloggers, as well as between bloggers and direct-action groups. "There was too much content—literally too many life-and-death issues—to let this anniversary go by," Moseley says.

Speakers at Rising Tide included Morwen Madrigal, who explained how she used her "Gentilly Girl" blog and a neighborhood e-list to help form the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, a twenty-two-neighborhood group that advocates for the mixed-income, mixed-race Gentilly neighborhood in the city-planning process. For G Bitch, who also spoke at the conference, the next step is to find ways to make the Internet more inclusive. "There are populations in the city that aren't represented at all online," she says. "New Orleans is not monocultural; it never was and it can't work that way. There are a lot of people who aren't into the technology, but they still need to be heard." MICHAEL TISSERAND

Michael Tisserand is a writer based in Evanston, Illinois. His new book, Sugarcane Academy, *will be published by Harcourt next spring. For a list of informative New Orleans websites and blogs, go to www.thenation.com.*

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their lives, a "brilliant opportunity to rethink democracy."

Ask Katrina activists what it will take to turn around the region's fortunes, and many will come back to the idea that the Katrina movement must go national—even international (what about the United Nations principles guaranteeing rights for "Internally Displaced People"?).

For one, Katrina activists need good allies; they can't do it all alone. But it also speaks to the need for federal accountability. "The way we see it, it was federally run levees that failed and caused most of the death and destruction," observes Darryl Malek-Wiley, a longtime New Orleans activist. "So the federal government owes us something. Call it reparations." And not just money for no-bid contracts, rescuing Army bases and tax-break corporate "GO Zones," but resources for people's needs.

Where has been the national movement to demand justice for the Gulf and its people? Aside from tossing a few political hand grenades after the storm, Democrats largely dropped Katrina as a major issue; House minority leader Nancy Pelosi didn't make her first trip to New Orleans until March 3, six months after the gravest "natural" disaster in US history.

A handful of national groups have proved to be more useful: The Advancement Project and the NAACP got to work on housing, labor and voting rights. The Sierra Club and other outfits have helped residents address environmental threats. This summer the AFL-CIO unveiled a $1 billion investment from its pension funds to underwrite affordable housing, hospitals and other projects, and Change to Win is helping with a workers' center. New groups like Color of Change and the Katrina Information Network have heightened media scrutiny, and Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. and former Senator John Edwards have barnstormed the country to talk about Katrina and poverty.

But added up, it's been a far cry from the broad mobilization or channeling of public outrage that could have changed the course of the past year. And there's been plenty of outrage: In February 66 percent of voters nationwide said they were bothered "a great deal or good amount" by Bush's handling of Katrina—far outpacing concern for the Valerie Plame and Jack Abramoff scandals, which were objects of pundit obsession.

"The Democrats and most national groups, they didn't tap into that anger," says one African-American activist, who didn't want me to use his name. "A black city is destroyed, thousands are dead, hundreds of thousands of lives were devastated. We needed a March on Washington moment. They didn't care."

The national alliances required to shift federal priorities may still need to gain traction, but the Katrina movement has already left another legacy to the country by inspiring a new generation of activism.

Far from the halls of power, in the devastated Ninth Ward a clutch of volunteers, descendants of another strand of the 1960s freedom movement, are buzzing. And hammering: It's February, and the mostly white and conspicuously counter-cultural youth at the Common Ground Collective are erecting bunk beds at breakneck speed.

"Spring break," explains our guide Matt, a ponytailed DJ from New York. "We're expecting hundreds of volunteers to come." As it turns out, March brought 2,900 volunteers from 220 colleges (and eight countries) to Common Ground, a project

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Perhaps the best recommendation for the tour is that about half of the tour group will be participants in our previous study tours to Vietnam or their friends or relatives. We expect all places for the tour to be filled by October. A $200 deposit holds a place, refundable until full payment due date on 1 February 2007.

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launched as an emergency health clinic and relief center days after Katrina by Malik Rahim, a former Black Panther. Under the slogan "Solidarity, Not Charity," Common Ground soon became a beacon for Seattle-generation activists, and has since proliferated new outposts and projects across the city, from house-gutting to "bio-remediation" of soil toxins and the opening of a Women's Center.

The success and high profile of Common Ground—which has brought some 10,000 volunteers through its crash-course program in mutual aid that includes a radical history of New Orleans and a workshop in "Dismantling Racism"—have overshadowed other impressive youth efforts in the region, such as a spring-break drive that brought more than a thousand students from historically black colleges into community projects.

This is their Freedom Summer, and those making the pilgrimage can't help but be changed by the experience. They've been cast into a scattered but epic battle between the Gulf's dispossessed—relegated to lives in tents, trailers and exile—and a gathering storm of privateers and power brokers whose ambitions can only sharpen the divide between those who have and those who are clearly holding on to very little.

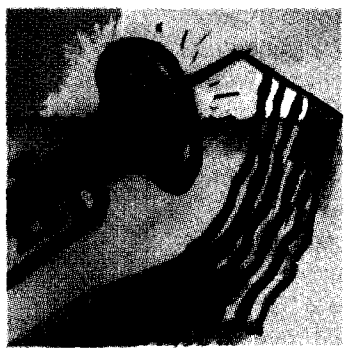
Which, in the eyes of New Orleans lawyer-activist Bill Quigley, prepares them perfectly for the struggles they face back home. "In New Orleans it's so condensed and easy to see, but these same forces of destroying our public housing, destroying public healthcare, destroying public education—those things are happening in every community across this country," Quigley says. "What is happening in New Orleans is coming to your community." ■

NEW ORLEANS WAS DECIMATED BY AN IDEOLOGICAL PROGRAM, NOT A STORM.

Undone by Neoliberalism

ADOLPH REED JR.

In October 2005, returning from my first trip to New Orleans since the week before the storm, I wound up in conversation with a 40-something white doctor who lives in Jackson, Mississippi. As a native Floridian, she had a sense of the damage that a Category 4 or 5 storm could produce even as far inland as Jackson; so, when Katrina was upgraded on the weekend before landfall, she headed for the city's main storm shelter to volunteer. She was shocked when she arrived to find that no other doctors had volunteered. She expressed surprise and dismay that "people just didn't step up." When I suggested that's one reason we need a strong central government, to mobilize responses to such crises, she immediately and animatedly dissented that she doesn't believe in "big government." When I asked who, then, was to have "stepped up," her response was vague—individual doctors, unspecified voluntary groups. She had no conception that there are some things only large public institutions can do in a centrally organized way. When we changed the topic to maintain civility, I learned that she was going to visit her son, a University of Pennsylvania student. On hearing that's where I teach, she related with glee that the previous semester her progeny had taken a course on Tupac Shakur: "Only at Penn, right?" That's one facet of the neoliberal mindset; it can be broadening and culturally enriching to spend $40,000 a year for a child to learn about a dead rapper, but a counterproductive use of resources to fund government and public services.



KAREN CALDICOTT

This brings to mind Margaret Thatcher's infamous quip, that there is "no such thing [as society]...there are individual men and women and there are families." In his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey quotes Thatcher's succinct statement of the neoliberal ideological program: "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul." The goal of this change is acceptance, as the unquestioned natural order of things, that private is always better than public, and that the main functions of government are to enhance opportunities for the investor class and suppress wages for everyone else. Hurricane Katrina and reactions to it throw into relief how successful that program has been.

The neoliberal worldview, which the late Daniel Singer, among others, memorialized as TINA—There Is No Alternative to market logic—has become the default position of common sense. Its smug moral standard is drawn from an idealized world in which equivalent individuals make choices in line with an abstract market rationality. Its viciousness seeped through even during the phase of mass-mediated compassion for the human suffering in New Orleans. The litany of victim-blaming questions frequently enough arose: Why didn't they evacuate? Why would they choose to live below sea level? Why should we be expected to pay for their choices? Those questions no doubt had a racial edge regarding New Orleans, but it is useful to recall that Joseph Allbaugh, Michael Brown's predecessor as FEMA director, denigrated FEMA as a huge "entitlement program" when he took over and promptly stonewalled rural white, heavily Republican Missourians with the same kind of accusatory language during the severe flooding of the Mississippi River in 2001. A critique that focuses just on race misses how the deeper structures of neoliberal practice and ideology underlie the travesty in New Orleans, as well as in the other devastated areas of the Gulf Coast. (Adjacent to the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard

Adolph Reed Jr. is professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the interim national council of the Labor Party. This article is excerpted from the introduction to Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina *(Nation Books).*

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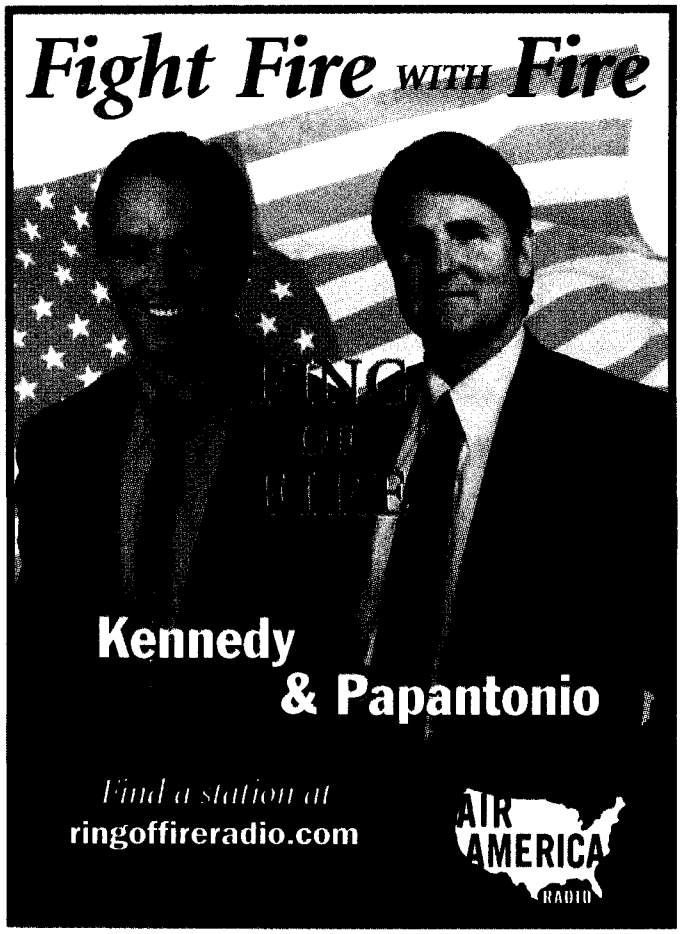
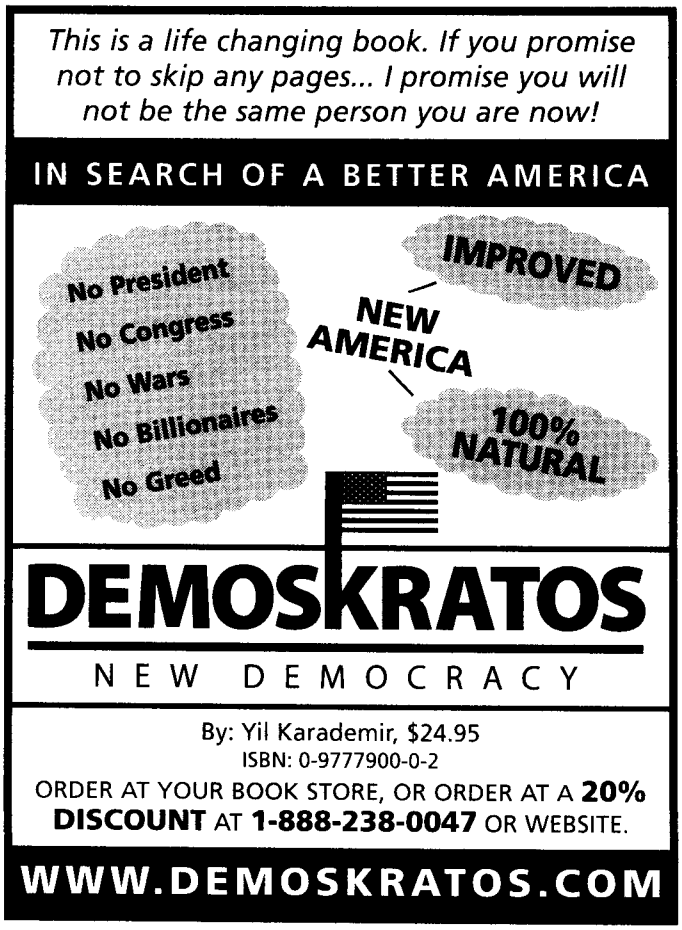
Parish, nearly 90 percent white, working class and reliably Republican, was virtually wiped off the face of the earth. Most of the parish's housing was destroyed. No hospitals or public libraries have reopened, and only 20 percent of its schools are operating.)

The "chocolate city" quip for which Mayor Ray Nagin became notorious nationally was an instance of his scuffling to reassure angry black New Orleanians that he did not endorse the widely touted models of a smaller, whiter city that seemed to follow from his administration's utterances and practices. And it is revealing of the depth and persistence of many whites' racial double standards that the Mayor's affirmation of the goal of retaining a black majority provoked a national and local firestorm of denunciation as narrow and racist, but the many calls for remaking New Orleans as a white-majority city, to which he was ultimately responding, generated no such reaction. But as it turned out, even though the most politically articulate and militant demands stressed the rights of renters [see Chris Kromm, page 22], Nagin's main policy concession to the protest against the rebuilding proposals was to extend greater latitude to "homeowners." Thus, in what was supposed to be a victory for popular interests against developers, renters were left out of the equation entirely and established as non-stakeholders. The irony is that blacks were disproportionately renters, and renters were disproportionately black. And roughly 90 percent of rental units destroyed were low-income affordable. Many, no doubt a preponderance, of black homeowners are not affluent, and securing greater civic voice for homeowners democratized the process, if only by slowing down the development juggernaut a bit. Nevertheless, the concession at the same time inscribed property ownership as the condition for entry into the arena of interest groups with effective civic voice.

Treating property ownership as the sine qua non for policy consideration didn't raise any eyebrows locally or nationally, except among the ranks of those who were left out. Neither the black Mayor nor the majority-black City Council has shown initiative in taking into account, much less defending, the interests of poor New Orleanians. The city's evacuation plans notoriously failed to anticipate adequately poor people's circumstances and needs. Landlords began evicting tenants without a hint of due process as soon as water receded and rumors spread of possibilities for extracting exorbitant rents from construction workers. The state officially prohibited evictions before October 25, but that prohibition was academic for the tens of thousands of people dispersed in shelters around the region and nation. And even that minimal right was flagrantly ignored with impunity. New Orleans City Council president Oliver Thomas complained in February that government programs and agencies had "pampered" poor people and proclaimed that they should not be encouraged to return. As he put it, "We don't need soap opera watchers right now." At least one other black councilmember expressed support of his view, as did the New Orleans Housing Authority receiver.

This all attests to the triumph of neoliberalism as both ideology and policy regime, and that triumph is seamlessly compatible with the discourse of racial politics. Black property owners, after all, are stakeholders as well as whites. Demonizing government to cut public spending and regulation, plundering the public

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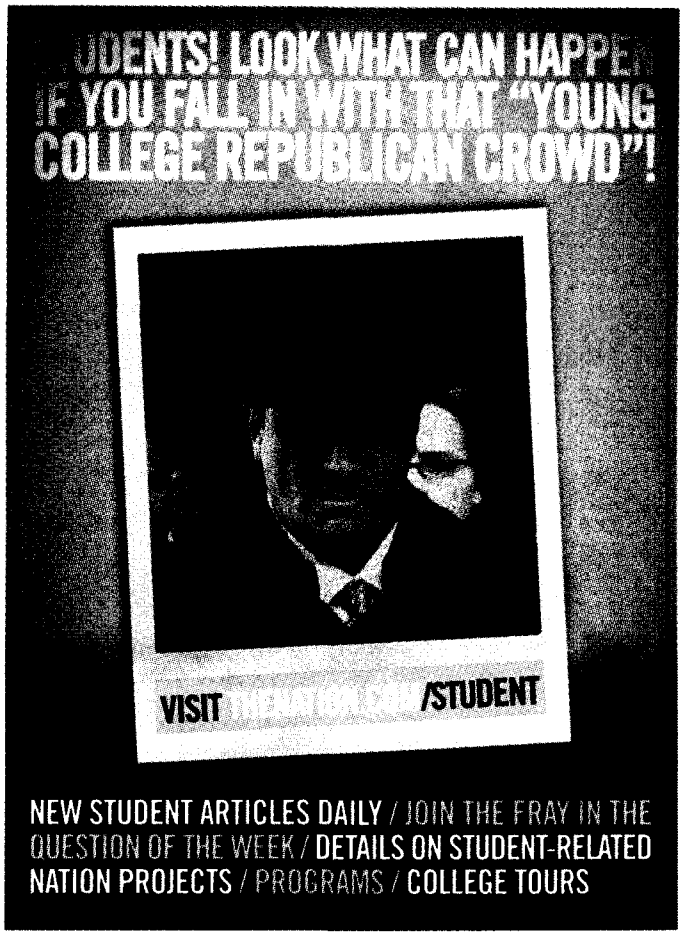
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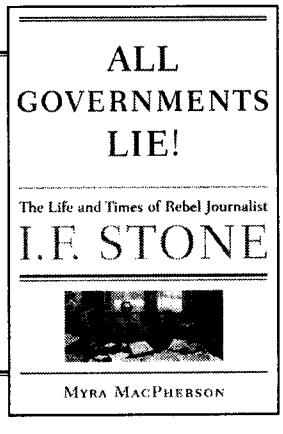

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treasury through privatization and rationalizing both through the myth of magical market efficiency all underlie what happened to New Orleans. The storm exposed the consequences of neoliberalism's lies and mystifications, in a single locale and all at once. The levees on the 17th Street and London Avenue canals, it turns out, failed because they were inadequately constructed. In the words of the Independent Levee Investigation Team, "safety was exchanged for efficiency and reduced costs." This was largely the result of federal underfunding, partly the result of the Army Corps of Engineers' skimping, partly state and local officials' temporizing and lack of government oversight or, in neoliberal parlance, cutting government red tape. The breach of the Industrial Canal, and much of the flooding of St. Bernard Parish, resulted from storm surge that pushed up the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, a boondoggle channel dug four decades ago as corporate welfare that was obsolete almost from its opening.

It's certainly understandable that Mayor Nagin found himself overwhelmed and that he occasionally lost composure in the first days of a sui generis disaster, and the negative comparisons of him to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's handling of 9/11 are absurd, if not racist twaddle. I took the subway with no problem to my office, not much more than a mile up Fifth Avenue from the World Trade Center, and then walked to my apartment in Alphabet City, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, on 9/12. Nearly all New Orleans's infrastructure was destroyed, overwhelmed or inaccessible after the levees failed; not even most of Manhattan below 14th Street was in that condition after the World Trade Center collapse. Nagin's finest moments were his no-nonsense denunciations of the Bush Administration's dereliction and his passionate demands for federal assistance.

Nevertheless, at every point the Mayor has been hamstrung and undone by his commitment to a neoliberal approach to government. Less than two months before Katrina, the Nagin administration determined that it couldn't afford to provide transportation to evacuate. So the city produced DVDs to distribute in poor neighborhoods, alerting residents that they would be on their own in the event of a major storm. Since then, Nagin and other local officials have governed unwaveringly in line with neoliberal presumptions, even as doing so may have stifled repopulation and reconstruction. First, while the city was still submerged, Nagin fired some 3,000 municipal employees, many, if not most, of whom had lost their homes or been displaced. Later, the Orleans Parish School Board laid off 7,500 teachers and other employees. No serious consideration was given to the possibility that maintaining a public workforce could help people return sooner by giving them income, providing services and augmenting the cleanup and reconstruction efforts.

A year after the storm, municipal services remain barely existent. Fewer than half the schools in Orleans Parish are open. Most of those are operating as charter schools, as privatizers have seized the moment. Just about half of the bus routes and fewer than a third of the buses in New Orleans are in service. My family and countless others attest to the hassle of trying to deal with the irrationality of privatized utilities companies. Still, both Mayor and Council can imagine only scenarios in which the "private sector" will be stimulated to come to the rescue and lead a renaissance. This means they can imagine only policies aimed at boost-

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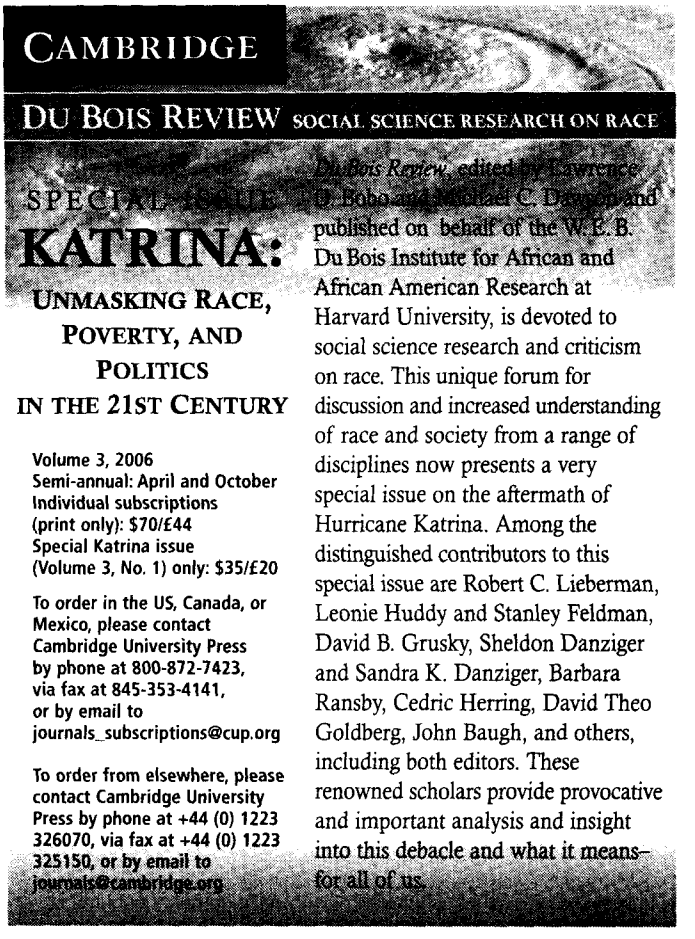
ing investor confidence—cutting spending precisely when they should be increasing it—or drawing on corporate "expertise."

And this isn't just a New Orleans thing. St. Bernard Parish, practically without revenue, has outsourced much of its police service, bringing in DynCorp, a private military-services firm—what used to be called mercenaries. It's difficult to understand how paying them at least three to four times more (some estimates run as high as $950 per man, per day) than the local deputies with whom they'll be grouped will save money. In the days after the storm Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco hired Blackwater USA, another such firm, to provide "security" in New Orleans, during the period when subsequently disproven rumors of chaos and widespread violence titillated the nation and fueled the right's pornographic racism. The state even outsourced identification of bodies after the hurricane, in some cases, apparently, to firms with histories of fraud and misfeasance.

It's at the federal level, where the responsibility should be heaviest in times of such great disaster, that the practical realization of neoliberal vision is most striking. The Bush Administration's refusal, in the face of overwhelming evidence of the danger, to fund the New Orleans levee project is well-known and criminal. Michael Brown's incompetence and lack of engagement at FEMA became breathtakingly clear to the public shortly after Katrina's landfall. His e-mail records show just how cynical his appointment was. As Katrina steamed through the Gulf, he hesitated to declare a disaster area in its Florida wake, expressing concern that some might file fraudulent claims. Presumably for the same reason he temporized until the storm had come ashore on the Gulf Coast. On August 29, hours after the storm hit Louisiana, he issued a press statement urging us all to contribute to a list of sixteen recommended private charities to support relief efforts. That was a strange enough abdication of his responsibility as director of the federal agency charged with managing emergencies, but the Red Cross was one of just two secular agencies on the list. On the 31st, responding to a memo alerting him to critical conditions at the Superdome and Convention Center, he wrote, "Thanks for the update. Anything specific I need to do or tweak?" A few hours later he replied to a frustrated staffer in the field, "I'm working on an organization chart and staffing plan now." During those days he found time to respond to e-mails from random citizens either praising or criticizing his efforts and forward them, along with self-pitying comments, to his staff.

Brown was in over his head. But the larger point is that he and his bosses—Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and President Bush—have so little regard for government that they couldn't conceive of the agency's functions, even to go through the motions. They could connect only to do public relations damage control, punish enemies and outsource plunder to cronies. When the chief executive officers of the parishes hardest hit by Katrina and then Rita participated in a discussion on local public television in late October 2005, each of them was trenchantly critical of FEMA's shoddy performance (and the Red Cross's, by the way). They also complained bitterly about Halliburton and the other private contractors hired to do cleanup. The main charge was that the firms refused to coordinate with others and demanded additional pay for every action. Such is the practical truth of "market efficiency."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SPECIAL ISSUE
KATRINA:
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Volume 3, 2006
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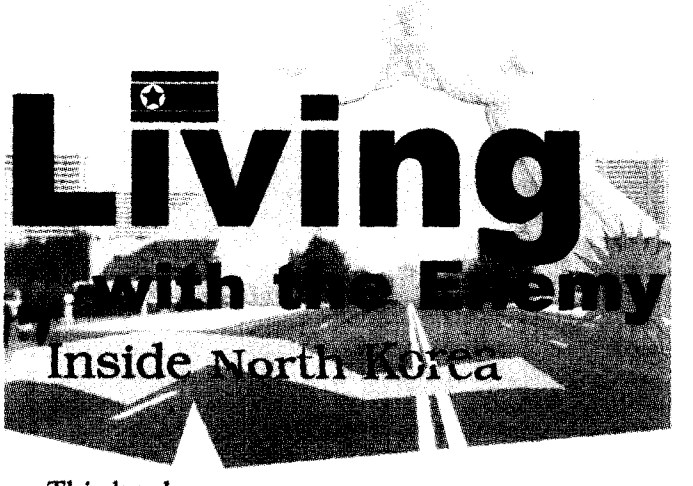
Du Bois Review, edited by Lawrence D. Bobo and Michael C. Dawson and published on behalf of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, is devoted to social science research and criticism on race. This unique forum for discussion and increased understanding of race and society from a range of disciplines now presents a very special issue on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Among the distinguished contributors to this special issue are Robert C. Lieberman, Leonie Huddy and Stanley Feldman, David B. Grusky, Sheldon Danziger and Sandra K. Danziger, Barbara Ransby, Cedric Herring, David Theo Goldberg, John Baugh, and others, including both editors. These renowned scholars provide provocative and important analysis and insight into this debacle and what it means—for all of us.



This book offers a quite unique look at a land that has both intrigued and puzzled outsiders for decades. Dr. Saccone lived and worked in North Korea studying their behavior while chronicling his fascinating experiences. Travel the country like few foreigners have and meet North Koreans on their terms. Finally, we can learn how North Koreans live, think and act from a person who penetrated the facade presented to most foreigners. He has broken the code on this interesting but little understood culture.

Author_ Richard Saccone

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www.hollym.com
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There are groups and individuals struggling mightily to provide services and advocate for the interests of poor and displaced New Orleanians, renters and others likely to be simply cast aside by the market imperative. But they lack resources to be effective in the current political environment. On the national scale neither the labor movement (in either institutional variety), nor women's, civil rights or environmentalist groups, nor, least of all, the Democratic Party seems prepared to advance and fight for a clear alternative vision.

As time goes on, fewer and fewer Americans will recall that government can do anything but make war and suppress dissent. Unless current patterns change, the struggle for New Orleans's future may be a more extreme, condensed version of the future of many, many more people as the bipartisan neoliberal consensus reduces government to a tool of corporations and the investor class alone. ■

LETTERS
CONTINUED

(Continued From Page 2)
books, regardless of authorship, that do not advance our understanding of the subject.

The contention that taking Hirsi Ali and Manji to task for their inability to differentiate between doctrine and practice somehow results in "playing into the hands of the fundamentalists" strikes me as reductionist. A distinction between doctrine and practice is precisely what Islamist parties refuse to do. They insist on a rigid interpretation of sacred texts and want to apply the letter of the law exactly as it was written 1,400 years ago—which has resulted in unmitigated disaster wherever it has been applied. By drawing the distinction between doctrine and practice, and indeed by widening it to include a modern understanding of human rights, one hopes to open the dialogue that is so sorely missing from discussions of "Islam."

LAILA LALAMI

JUST WHO *IS* BARACK OBAMA?

Comanche, Iowa

■ David Sirota's June 26 "Mr. Obama Goes to Washington" hit me like a bolt of lightning. I can see Illinois from where I sit, and I've been paying attention to Barack Obama since his election to the Senate. I was heartened by his speech at the Democratic National Convention. I expected big things. But I find I don't know the man. Obama leaves many of us wondering who he is. His responses were disappointing in some cases and downright alarming in others. It's obvious from this interview that we should not expect to see much activism from him. What does that leave? More of the inertia we've lived with for years. RANDI GIFFORD

Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

■ When Barack Obama was asked by David Sirota for an illustration of credible reform "within the system," Obama selected healthcare, but then shifted to unemployment, asking what would happen to the millions of insurance paper-pushers whose job it is to prevent easy access to healthcare. Good thing Obama wasn't in the Senate in 1902 when the Oldsmobile threatened the livelihood of buggy-whip makers everywhere, or we'd still be shoveling manure off the streets of Manhattan. The purpose of healthcare is not to employ workers—whether physicians, support staff or insurance subordinates—but to ease suffering. Healthcare for all *will* be less profitable for the real beneficiaries of the healthcare industry: insurers, Pharma and the American Hospital Association. If this isn't DLC drift, what is it? LIN OSBORN, *director Health Plan Navigator*

Louisville, Ky.

■ Senator Barack Obama expresses concern that a national healthcare system would cause job loss in the for-profit health insurance industry. I suggest he look carefully at HR 676, the Conyers bill. Provisions for job transfer and retraining are spelled out. As more than 45 million of the now uninsured and underinsured gain full coverage, healthcare workers will be in great demand. Surely Obama is not worried about the highly paid CEOs and lobbyists who work for a healthcare industry that holds us all in bondage.

HARRIETTE SEILER

Crystal Lake, Ill.

■ There is no perfect candidate. But what I witnessed at a town hall meeting with my senator, Barack Obama, in my white, mostly conservative county (represented by Phil Crane for hundreds of years, if that will give you a clue) was something to behold. The college gym was packed to the rafters with young and old, students, grannies, men in business suits, soccer moms and all absolutely starry-eyed and enraptured by Obama. He has an easy manner. He is witty, charming and intelligent. The audience asked tough questions and got smart answers. They laughed at his jokes and stood and cheered as if he were a rock star. This is charisma like I have never witnessed. I think it would be a huge mistake to dismiss this liberal Democrat with the rare quality of connecting to the heart and soul of the voting public. VICKI DOW

Washington, DC

■ It doesn't matter how much charisma or intelligence or promise any legislative minority freshman has; s/he's still a freshman in the minority. To earn the respect and trust needed to exert principled influence on policy-making over the long run, a freshman simply must show some deference to veteran colleagues and avoid the temptation to grandstand.

Case in point: Sheila Jackson Lee, a Houston African-American, was one of only thirteen Democratic freshmen elected to the House in 1994, the year Newt Gingrich engineered the end of her party's nearly four-decade control of that body. Lee, a graduate of Yale Law School who won the seat of the late House giant Barbara Jordan, was seen as a rising star, like Barack Obama. But the voluble Lee sought the media spotlight for every left-wing cause. As her communications director at the time, I failed to dissuade her from this imprudent approach. Lee developed a reputation as an egomaniacal prima donna and has since squandered much of her credibility with the media and colleagues. And though she could remain in Congress for decades—indefinitely winning re-election in her gerrymandered district—no one in Washington expects her ever to exert serious influence on policy-making.

Obama's been in office only twenty months. If Sirota and other impatient progressives want to see him go down in history as an effective leader, they should climb off his back and be thankful he understands that real progress takes time. DARREN MCKINNEY

Lafayette, La.

■ Barack Obama is wise in being careful. He has to walk through a pit of vipers without getting bit so badly his career dies in its youth.

BRENT FAUL

HEROIC LIBRARIANS

Jacksonville, Fla.

■ Thank you for the editorial on librarians and the American Library Association protecting our liberties ["American Patriots," July 17/24]. To continue this fight for intellectual freedom, my brother, ALA associate executive director Gerald Hodges, who passed away in January, left part of his estate to the ALA. Librarians and library associations worldwide have contributed to this cause. *Nation* readers who wish to donate can write checks to the American Library Association and send them to the Gerald Hodges Memorial Fund, ALA, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. LAURA J. HODGES

FOR THE RECORD (AND THE RECIPE)

■ Corby Kummer, who translated Carlo Petrini's contribution to the forum in last week's special food issue, is the author of *The Pleasures of Slow Food: Celebrating Authentic Traditions, Flavors and Recipes* (Chronicle), for which Petrini wrote the introduction. In Habiba Alcindor's "Black Farms, Black Markets," Heckscher playground is in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

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BOOKS & THE ARTS

Writers From the Other Asia

JOHN FEFFER

THE GUEST.
By Hwang Sok-Yong.
Translated by Kyung-Ja Chun and Maya West. Seven Stories. 237 pp. $27.95.

MODERN KOREAN FICTION: An Anthology.
Edited by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon.
Translated by Kim Miza and Suzanne Crowder Han. Columbia. 387 pp. $27.50.

THREE GENERATIONS.
By Yom Sang-seop.
Translated by Yu Young-nan.
Archipelago. 476 pp. $30.

TEN THOUSAND LIVES.
By Ko Un.
Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach.
Green Integer. 364 pp. $14.95.

According to the official North Korean version, the Americans were the culprits. In October 1950, the first year of the Korean War, American soldiers massacred tens of thousands of innocent people in the North Korean city of Sinchon. In perhaps the most horrifying incident, US soldiers led 900 residents, including 300 women and children, into an air-raid shelter. After the victims passed three days in thirst and fear, the GIs poured gasoline into the dark, confined space and threw in a match. Today in Sinchon, the North Korean authorities have memorialized this slaughter with burial mounds for the victims. The nearby American Imperial Massacre Remembrance Museum holds tours for school groups and the occasional foreign visitor. In September 1998 I visited the Sinchon museum and listened to the guide itemize the many wartime cruelties committed by American troops. She took our delegation to the burned-out shell of the air-raid shelter and, on the basis of survivor accounts, reconstructed the atrocities. It would be another year before the Associated Press published the first revelations of the US killings of civilians in July 1950 under a railway bridge near the South Korean hamlet of Nogunri. But based on what historian Bruce Cumings and others had described of US conduct during the Korean War—the saturation bombings, the threatened use of nuclear weapons—the museum guide's well-rehearsed stories seemed plausible, even accounting for the embellishments of North Korean propaganda.

In the 1980s South Korean novelist Hwang Sok-Yong visited the same museum. He subsequently interviewed several survivors of the Sinchon massacre who had immigrated to the United States. Their description of what transpired in the fall of 1950 diverged so radically from the North Korean account that Hwang was driven to write about the incident. His novel *The Guest* provoked fierce controversy among readers in South Korea, where it was published in 2001.

Korean literature—long terra incognita in the West—is finally establishing its rightful place in the world republic of letters.

Finally available in English, in a translation by Kyung-Ja Chun and Maya West, *The Guest* joins the handful of Korean novels published in the United States. While Japanese and Chinese literatures have established footholds in intellectual circles here—from the classics of Sun Tzu and Junichiro Tanizaki to Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and the postmodern fictions of Haruki Murakami—Korean literature remains terra incognita. Japan and China, of course, built empires. Korea suffered the indignities of colonialism at the hands of its neighbors and now endures the frustrations of relative cultural invisibility in the eyes of the West. American novelists such as Chang-Rae Lee and Nora Okja Keller have drawn

John Feffer (www.johnfeffer.com) is the author of North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis *(Seven Stories).*

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inspiration from Korean material, but no Korean author has become a household name in the United States—despite the brilliance of Yi Munyol's meditation on authoritarian psychology in *Our Twisted Hero* or Ahn Junghyo's blistering portrait of South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War in *White Badge*.

But Korean literature is finally attracting more of its rightful share of the limelight. In October 2005 South Korea was the guest of honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair. As part of the festivities, sixty-two South Korean writers gave readings to enthralled German audiences. One of those present in Frankfurt, poet Ko Un, has appeared on the Nobel shortlist for several years. A clutch of Korean translations have recently appeared, from classics like Yom Sang-seop's *Three Generations* and Lee Mu-young's *Farmers* to avant-garde short stories and the work of too-often-overlooked women writers. Even North Korean fiction, perhaps the least accessible of any Communist literature, is attracting renewed attention.

Korean culture has a certain pungency that complicates its entry into the global mainstream. Korean movies, traditional songs and fermented dishes are acquired tastes. This pungency has been sharpened by Korea's recent historical experience. The twentieth century, after all, was not kind to the Korean peninsula. The first fifty years were marred by Japanese colonialism, the second fifty by division, fratricidal war and the dictatorial politics that dominated both North and South. Famine and its attendant diseases killed as much as 10 percent of the North Korean population in a few short years at the end of the 1990s. Added to these unspeakable horrors are the quotidian but no less heartbreaking tragedies that accompanied rapid industrialization, despoliation of the environment and the cold war separation of so many families.

The depiction and re-evaluation of these tragedies, both large and small, constitute a major driving force of Korean literature. Suffering does not necessarily produce great art. Like the Irish and the Polish before them, though, Koreans have created a language of suffering capable of attracting not only world sympathy but artistic appreciation as well.

Koreans once called smallpox, one of the most homicidal pathogens in human history, their "guest." Uninvited and virulent, this guest left behind many dead and generations of scarred survivors. In *The Guest* Hwang has in mind two very different uninvited scourges that infected Korea in the modern era: Christianity and Marxism.

Of the two culprits that Hwang fingers at the outset of the novel, Christianity is perhaps the more surprising. Though it is difficult to recognize after fifty years of anti-religious policy, the present capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, was once known as the "Jerusalem of the East" for its concentration of churches and the fervor of its converts. When former guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung began introducing Marxism in earnest in 1946, he strategically incorporated aspects of Christianity into the official political ideology and, later, into his personality cult (much as Christianity absorbed woman-centered pagan rituals into a Marian cult to gain adherents in medieval Europe). Between 1948 and 1950, during the undeclared war between North and South that preceded the Korean War, Christianity and Marxism battled each other for the soul of the peninsula.

Like other works of magic realism, The Guest *features supernatural events, a succession of ghosts—and unspeakable atrocities.*

Here *The Guest* departs from the official script. In the fall of 1950, the American army did not reach Sinchon in time to participate in any massacres. Instead, Koreans inflicted the damage on themselves. For a country accustomed to blaming others—the Chinese, the Japanese, the Americans—this history is not easy to swallow. Hwang, though, is comfortable in this role of truth-teller. His earlier fiction catalogued the human losses associated with Korea's economic miracle and its participation in the Vietnam War. He spent five years in jail for his unauthorized visit to the North. Now he is taking full advantage of the more liberal climate of free speech in the South and the warming of relations between the two halves of the peninsula to tell a story that will haunt even those who have no connection to the events described.

The Guest follows Ryu Yosop, a minister in a Korean-American community in Brooklyn, as he prepares to visit North Korea and the family he left behind as a young child. "Hometown" is a cherished concept in Korea. It is bound up not only in friendships and family relations but also in the rites of ancestor worship that have survived more than a century of Christian evangelism. For Yosop, though, his hometown conjures up decidedly mixed feelings: "The word started out with the scent of a mountain berry, lingering at the tip of one's tongue—but then the fragrance suddenly turned into the stench of rotting fish." He wants to visit his family—one of the millions of families divided by the Korean War—but he worries that his family background and religious affiliation will scotch his visa application. So he puts down the North Korean capital of Pyongyang as his birthplace on the visa form and trusts that somehow he will find his way back to Sinchon.

A few days before his flight, Yosop checks in with his older brother in New Jersey. A retired minister who has become practically a recluse in his suburban home, Yosop's brother doesn't want to talk about the old days. Yosop sees the visit to the North as an opportunity to confront the dimly remembered horrors of the past, to repent for sins and forgive those who sinned. Yosop's brother, whose memories are considerably more precise, disagrees. "Why should I beg for forgiveness," he angrily retorts. "I was on the side of Michael the archangel and those bastards were the beasts of the Apocalypse!"

Several days later, overwhelmed by guilt and anger, Yosop's older brother takes to his bed and quietly passes away. His stories, however, do not die with him. As Yosop makes his way to North Korea, he is visited by a succession of ghosts, including his brother's. These uninvited apparitions, yet another of the novel's guests, supply details about the blood-soaked days of 1950 and the events that Yosop had been too young to experience or fully understand.

With its supernatural events and chorus of spirits, *The Guest* would seem to belong to the tradition of magic realism. And like so much magic realism, it involves the remembrance of unspeakable atrocities. The novel that launched the genre, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, revolves around a massacre of banana workers. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* draws its considerable power from the tragic partition that divided India from Pakistan. As a trauma can provoke a derangement of the senses, so can a terrible crime push a writer toward fabulism. It is as though conventional storytelling has become incapable of conveying the magnitude of atrocity.

Yet for all its affinities with García Márquez and Rushdie, *The Guest*'s magical elements are faithful renditions of Korea's traditional shamanic culture. And

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when Yosop arrives in Pyongyang, what might appear to be magic realism turns out to be straight narration. Here, after all, is a country where the first leader, though dead, still occupies the highest office, where tens of thousands of young children perfectly synchronize their movements in mass games that celebrate the system, where a mammoth unfinished (and unfinishable) hotel dominates the cityscape and, like an embarrassing goiter, is pointedly ignored by guides and minders. North Korea is truly a land of "make-believe," as Hwang has remarked in interviews.

When Yosop eventually makes it to Sinchon and his surviving relatives, the tenor of the novel changes. The carefully constructed North Korean reality of Pyongyang, with its fixed itinerary of sights and sites, gives way to a very different world. Here, in the countryside, North Koreans let down their guard. They become real characters, rather than the brainwashed automatons of the "totalitarian" model. Yosop's family reunion is accompanied by tears, accusations, explanations. As we move deeper into the reconstructed events of 1950, Hwang resists shifting the narrative to the past in order to dramatize the action. Instead, he allows a chorus of the living and the dead to step up to the microphone and testify, as if at some celestial truth and reconciliation commission. No single narrative can capture the truth of the past, Hwang suggests. We are reduced to sifting through an array of often contradictory first-person accounts.

The witnesses tell Yosop of how, in the wake of MacArthur's pivotal landing at Inchon in mid-September 1950, a Christian paramilitary in Sinchon worked clandestinely with an anti-Communist youth corps from the South to seize the county administration from the Communists. These men of God show no mercy. "In the beginning, there is no rape," one ghost relates. "Far from it. Many times, after a kill, the young men stand together in a circle to pray together." Later, as the body count mounts, there is time for neither prayer nor proscriptions against rape. When the Communist Party cadres regroup and regain control, their vengeance is equally unsparing. The wounded are shot on the spot. Prisoners are lined up against the wall and executed. Young men are dragged into military service against their will and then, when the fortunes of war shift and they fall into "enemy" hands, they are killed as surely as the true believers.

By the time *The Guest* reaches the atrocity in the air-raid shelter, the question of culpability is almost beside the point. The war has become a swirl of thrust and counterthrust, and the reader can be forgiven for losing track of who has done what to whom. So much blood has been spilled, and it has stained all hands. But in Sinchon, those hands are all Korean. The Americans, for their overall stage management, barely qualify as accomplices. After the dust has settled and permanent battle lines have been drawn, the exigencies of nationalism and group psychology have reduced this complex tale of revenge to simple anti-Americanism. The Americans, after all, were responsible for a great number of atrocities in the war, so why not add a few more in the interests of smoothing the path toward eventual Korean reunification?

A novel that so closely follows historical fact raises the question: How much literary license has Hwang taken? I asked Bruce Cumings, the foremost American historian of the Korean War and another visitor to the Sinchon site. Hwang's take is plausible and convincing, he told me.

The Guest is worthwhile not only for its heterodox version of Korean history and its intriguing portrait of North Korean society. It is a finely rendered work of fiction—disturbing yet somehow beauti-

Five Poems by Ko Un

Two beggars
sharing a meal of the food they've been given

The new moon shines intensely

*

In a poor family's yard
the moon's so bright it could beat out rice-cakes

*

Get yourself a friend
come to know a foe
Get yourself a foe
come to know a friend

What kind of game is this?

*

A thousand drops
hanging from a dead branch

The rain did not fall for nothing

*

Without a sound

resin buried underground is turning into amber
while above the first snow is falling

Translated from the Korean
by Brother Anthony of Taizé,
Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach

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ful. Hwang's achievement should resonate long after the controversies over its illumination of one dark corner of the Korean War subside.

The preoccupations of *The Guest* are not peculiar to Hwang Sok-Yong. Pak Wanso, one of Korea's most celebrated postwar women authors, tells a very similar story in "Mother's Hitching Post" in the new collection *Modern Korean Fiction*, translated by Kim Miza and Suzanne Crowder Han. The guilt-ridden relationship of the two brothers in Hwang's novel is transposed in Pak's 1980 story onto a mother and daughter. Now in her 80s, the mother has repressed a horrifying memory from the Korean War, when she was fleeing with her children from war-ravaged Seoul. Her son, conscripted into the North Korean army, has deserted. The mother cannot save him from the cat-and-mouse games of the North Korean officer who discovers the family. Nor, when the son dies at the hands of the officer, can she bury him properly in the family's burial ground, which lies over the border in the North. While the suppressed guilt destroys Yosop's brother in *The Guest*, the mother in Pak's story manages to relieve some of her burden by revealing the painful memories to her daughter.

Koreans call this experience of suppressed guilt and suffering *han*. The epiphany of the traditional short story in the Western canon can often be found in Korean fiction in the cathartic unburdening of *han*. Though painful, it is a powerful source of creative energy. Writers who explore the theme of collective oppression and its psychological consequences, from the Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki to Toni Morrison, would have no difficulty translating *han* into their own tongues.

The tragedies of Korea are not confined simply to times of war. The short stories in *Modern Korean Fiction* are full of the language of hunger and sickness, of the poverty of workers and farmers. The stories from the colonial period are particularly poignant, published as they were under difficult circumstances. Between 1919, when the Japanese authorities brutally suppressed a national uprising, and the late 1930s, when the colonial administration imposed Japanese culture and a forced labor system, Koreans were granted a measure of breathing room. During this interregnum, characterized by the more ordinary debasements of colonial rule, Korean writers were still able to place short stories in the daily newspapers. Even as late as 1938, Ch'ae Man-shik could publish in a Seoul daily his satiric story "My Innocent Uncle," about an oafish collaborator with the Japanese.

In the 1930s, too, Yom Sang-seop published what is considered one of the masterpieces of early modern Korean fiction, *Three Generations*, which recently appeared in a new translation by Yu Young-nan. Far from describing the atrocities of Japanese rule, Yom's novel depicts a stultified society in which the old depart from Confucian values and the young cannot build a new world for themselves. Several characters engage in an almost halfhearted conspiracy against the colonial authorities and inevitably fail. A father who fails to honor his ancestors or set a proper example for his son is brought low by his misdeeds. Characters speak to one another with a bluntness that seems awkward when set against, for instance, the Japanese aesthetic of indirection. The structure of the novel is uneven, the prose unremarkable. Nevertheless, in its way, *Three Generations* successfully portrays a society throttled by the "modernization" that Japan inflicted upon the peninsula. This delayed development, as much as the more violent policies of the era, constituted the tragedy of the colonial experience.

Poet Ko Un has created a rustic vernacular as earthy as the mountain vegetables that deepen the flavor of Korean food.

Ko Un, Korea's most renowned living poet, remembers the privations of the colonial era. Figuring prominently in his poems is the "barley hump" of the spring, when the winter stores have been eaten, the new barley crop has yet to ripen and the annual starvation sets in. As a young boy during the Korean War, Ko Un watched the deaths of friends and family and could do nothing to save them. At the end of the war, he worked as a gravedigger. Fertilized by all this death, his poetry bloomed:

> Mow down parents and children
> This, that, and the others,
> everything else.
> Knife them in the dark.
> Next morning
> the world is piled with death.
> Our chore is burying them all day
>
> and building a new world on it.

During his varied life, Ko Un has been a youthful scalawag, Buddhist monk, drunkard, teacher, political activist, jailed dissident and, now, Nobel Prize contender. He has published more than 100 books of poetry and prose. But his greatest claim to fame is *Maninbo*, or *Ten Thousand Lives*, which the American poet Robert Haass has described as "one of the most extraordinary projects in contemporary literature." Ko Un conceived of this project holed up in a military prison with other prominent dissidents. He vowed to write a poem for every person he had ever known, from his closest relatives to historical figures he'd only met in books. Green Integer has published a one-volume selection of this vast work for the first time in English, translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach.

Missing from the collection, unfortunately, is Ko Un's original introduction, in which he issued a declaration of independence from all foreign literary influence. No longer would he be seduced by graceful Chinese evocations of nature or the cryptic modernism of the West. In their place, Ko Un has constructed a rustic vernacular, a poetry of the Korean countryside as earthy as the mountain vegetables that deepen the flavor of Korean food. In these poems, a woman has "a laugh like cold bean-sprout soup," a man is so dull that he is "cousin of water,/ or of watered-down soy-sauce." Each poem resembles a miniature folk tale, expressed with koan-like simplicity, cautious of metaphors or abstraction. Much of South Korean history is poured into this folkloric mold, from the partisan fighter who gave birth in her cell before being hanged at the scaffold in the early 1950s all the way to dissident Kim Dae Jung, "the embodiment of suffering/at a time when suffering was needed," who became president in the 1990s.

This commemoration of Korean history and countryside, freed from strictures of form and diction imposed from the outside, follows in the tradition of *minjung*, or "people's" culture. Ko Un has "gone to the people" for his inspiration, much like the *narodniks*, the Russian radicals of the nineteenth century, and the South Korean student movement activists of the 1980s who emulated them. But Ko Un has not summoned up some ethereal concept of the People. *Maninbo*, his masterpiece, is the People made flesh. Thanks to Ko Un, they continue to walk among us, all 10,000 of them.

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Ko Un's counterpart has not yet emerged—or been allowed to emerge—in North Korea. The Soviet bloc was rich with the *samizdat* of dissident poets and the semi-official work of writers during one thaw or another. North Korea has none of that. Even among the several thousand North Koreans who live in South Korea, no literary work has appeared (though one defector has written a musical about the North Korean prison labor camp at Yodok). Very little of the official literature has even been translated into English. One novel, Han Sorya's *Jackals*, has appeared, as have several short stories. Since North Korean author Hon Sok-jung's novel *Hwangjini* won a prestigious South Korean prize in 2004 and official North Korean literature is more available in the South, some of this work might soon make its way into English.

In the meantime, we are left with a tantalizing glimpse of literary changes afoot in North Korea in a 1999 story nimbly translated by Stephen Epstein and published in a recent issue of the online magazine *Words Without Borders*. Han Ung-bin's "Second Encounter" draws on the usual North Korean boilerplate about building a strong and prosperous nation. But Han also alludes to the hardships of the famine years of the mid-1990s. And most of the story involves an encounter during a 1989 youth festival in Pyongyang between a foreign journalist and a literal-minded North Korean, mediated by the story's narrator. The misunderstandings are nearly comic, for the journalist can't quite believe that this average North Korean might live an ordinary life with an ordinary job and family, in a society with functioning schools and hospitals, with soft drinks for the kids and trips to the amusement park.

Such an ordinary existence was once within reach. North Korea's social system suffered enormous strains during the famine years. Schools and hospitals did not function as before. The merry-go-rounds rusted. "We have lost nothing," the narrator reflects upon the intervening years, referring more to patriotic fervor than material comforts. But North Koreans might read wistfulness or even concealed anger into Han's story. "Second Encounter" lends itself to more than one interpretation, which suggests a movement from simple propaganda toward actual literature.

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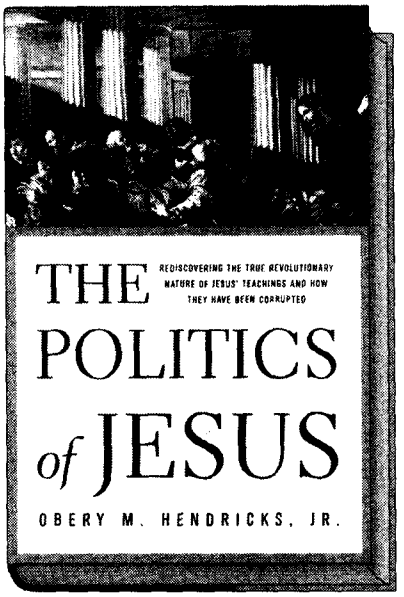
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It is still a far cry, of course, from an appraisal of North Korea's labor camps, extrajudicial killings, history of purges and the like. This catharsis, whenever it comes, will be unspeakably painful. Korean novelists, poets and short-story writers have mined the atrocities of the colonial period, the Korean War and the South's authoritarian era. These are, unfortunately, rich veins. When North Koreans can openly testify like the ghosts of *The Guest*, when the *han* of North Koreans is given proper voice, when a North Korean Ko Un can tell us about the people and not just the People, Korean literature will have a fresh infusion of horror and inspiration. ■

Let's Dance

MARINA HARSS

TANGO: The Art History of Love. By Robert Thompson. Pantheon. 360 pp. $28.50.

THE TANGO SINGER. By Tomás Eloy Martínez. Bloomsbury. 246 pp. $23.95.

First, a confession: I do not love the tango. That is to say, I do not love the dance known as the tango, with its showy steps and poses, its domineering male partnering and its ostentatious pauses. I do, however, have a soft spot for tango songs—the yearning melancholy of "Madreselva," the aggressive cynicism of "Cambalache," the cheerful resignation of "Adiós Muchachos," the bitterness of "Mano a Mano." These and other tangos are the inescapable soundtrack of daily life in Buenos Aires; you cannot be in that city for more than five minutes without hearing one playing in the background of a cab or cafe, or blaring from the radio of a construction site.

This personal preference should not be an impediment to enjoying Robert Thompson's *Tango: The Art History of Love*; tango, after all, is both a dance and a musical form, and more than anything a cultural phenomenon with a long and rich history, as varied and curious as that of the country that produced it. But only a few pages into Thompson's book, which is in many ways an informative—and surprising—account of the tango, it becomes clear that Thompson has no time for such tepid consumers of tango songs. In his view, "tango is action. That's what the world loves, more than the text or the sound." So much for the lilting strains of Carlos Gardel's voice and the arch melodies of the *bandoneón*.

For Thompson the history of the tango is a history of the repression of its origins and meaning, the deliberate rubbing out of its African roots. His passionately argued, sometimes bullying, book tries to demonstrate the impact of "African and Afro-Argentine influences" on the "rise, development, and achievement of the tango." He presents this work as a corrective to a field (tango studies) that has been "biased toward literature"—i.e., the lyrics of the tango song, written by and for white lyricists and musicians—and that, in his opinion, has fomented the false idea that "black influence, if present at the beginning, ha[s] long since disappeared." His mission is to prevent the "attempt to destroy this black-enhanced heritage."

Thompson's convictions should come as no surprise. A professor of African and African-American art history at Yale, he has written countless books and articles, and organized large exhibitions, on the subject of African art and its influence on the culture of the Americas. Thompson, who is not the least bit African-American, has devoted his professional life to bringing to light and analyzing the vibrancy and impact of African art on the Americas. The *New York Times* described *Flash of the Spirit*, his 1983 study of African and Afro-American art and philosophy, as a "wonderfully enthusiastic book" in which Thompson acted as "part anthropologist, part art critic, part musicologist, part student of religion and philosophy, and entirely an enthusiastic partisan of what he writes about." The same could be said of his new book, which exhibits a similar wide-ranging knowledge and enthusiasm, and an obsession with uncovering the "hipness," "swing," "cool" and "sass"—all, apparently, quintessentially black qualities—of the art form at hand. One suspects that his interest in the tango might be secondary to his desire to uncover African influences in yet another sphere.

This is not the book for the inquisitive neophyte, or one interested in the tango's evolution, beginning with its murky birth on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, the famous *arrabales*. In these outlying neighborhoods, former gauchos, pushed off the land by changes in the agricultural economy, crossed paths with European immigrants, urban lowlifes, prostitutes and black Argentines, most of them descendants of Africans who had been brought to Argentina and Brazil as slaves. Thompson's discussion of those first *milongas* of the 1870s and '80s, woven from the waltz, polka, Cuban *habanera*, Afro-Argentine *candombe* and the improvisations of gaucho *payadores* (folk singers), is confusing and difficult to follow. Nor does he give a detailed account of how *milonga* became *canyengue* (an early tango style in 2/4 meter), or how the *canyengue* style evolved into the smoother tango in 4/4 meter, or the rise of the *bandoneón* (a cousin of the concertina) as one of its defining instruments, or when and why the song form of the tango, the enormously popular *tango canción*, became popular. It's not to say that none of this information is in the book; much of it is, in some form, but you may have trouble finding it because the book is not organized chronologically but rather by loosely defined themes ("Tango in Hollywood," "Tango as Text," "The Cultural Preparation"), resulting in considerable repetition, as well as gaps, and a general sense of disorientation.

To be fair, part of the reason for the confusion is the undeniable fact that there is not much documentation of the earliest musical and dance styles of the tango. But partly it is the result of Thompson's extremely selective curiosity and attention toward his ostensible subject, and his fixation on uncovering the "authentic." Why, for example, does he begin the book with a chapter about the movies in which the tango is depicted, commenting on which of these is closest to the "true" spirit of the dance? (For the record, Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* is an aberration, while Carlos Saura's *Tango, No Me Dejes Nunca* is the "ultimate triumph" of tango in film.)

Someone with a less polemical approach to the art form would not give such short shrift to the European immigrant culture—especially Italian—that provided many of its composers, musicians and instruments. Thompson dismisses Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901–51), who wrote "Cambalache" (Junk Shop)—a pessimistic run-

Marina Harss is on the staff of The New Yorker. *She has translated several works from the Italian, including Pasolini's* Roman Stories.

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down of the first decades of the twentieth century, considered by many a kind of anthem—as a "darling of the intellectuals," over whose tangos "the literary elite of Buenos Aires practice their existentialism, their Marxism, their postmodernism, their whatever." This portrait would surely come as a surprise to the intellectuals of Discépolo's day, who rejected him as a Peronist, and to Discépolo himself, who died abandoned by friends and colleagues. And what about the musicians and composers of Italian descent, like Julio De Caro, who developed the sophisticated tango style of the 1920s? Clearly, they inhabited a "world of formally trained men" in contrast with the "world of black improvisers," whose "swing and spontaneity kept tango intensity from dissolving in refinement." (Maybe Jorge Luis Borges would agree. He too disdained the "cleaned up" tango of the 1920s and '30s, and despaired of "the perversion of the tango by Genovese immigration.") Thompson's tunnel vision means that Carlos Gardel, one of the most, if not *the* most, beloved of tango performers, gets only a few pages, as does the arrival of the *bandoneón* from Germany, and the influence of opera and operetta. Someone looking for a general history of the tango would be seriously misled by Thompson's selective memory, and would be better served by *Tango! The Dance, the Song, the Story*, a picture book with excellent, cogent essays by Simon Collier, Artemis Cooper, María Susana Azzi and Richard Martin—all serious scholars.

So what *is* Thompson's contribution to tango history? First and foremost, he provides a wealth of information on the black community in Argentina, a little-discussed and in some ways invisible element of the country's history and society. In 1810 African Argentines constituted almost 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires, a figure that dropped to a mere 2 percent by the end of the nineteenth century. Part of the explanation for this was the flooding in of hundreds of thousands of European immigrants (mainly from Italy and Spain) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some Argentines also say that many blacks were drafted to, and killed off in, the border wars with Paraguay in the 1860s, and that the rest succumbed to a yellow fever epidemic in 1871. Such explanations have become national myths, but the more likely reason, one that many Argentines still find difficult to swallow, is integration and intermarriage, as recent studies of the country's population have suggested. As Thompson observes, there is something racist about the assumption that blacks have somehow simply vanished, and that therefore present-day Argentines cannot be descended from them. Thompson effectively debunks this myth and argues, sometimes over-energetically, that Afro-Argentines have continued to be a significant presence in Buenos Aires's music and dance scene to this day. But even he is forced to admit that they have been a small minority—although he mystically insists that "there is a truth above statistics." Thompson's argument would be more forceful if he cut back on some of his effusive exclamations regarding "black stratagems" in Aníbal Troilo's *bandoneón* playing, *milonga* as a "creole Esperanto of the night" and dancers translating "strong winds from Africa and Europe into maneuvers that lead to a creole safe harbor." But it's undeniable that even though there may not be many blacks in Argentina, and were already not very many of them by the late nineteenth century, their influence on the origins and to a lesser degree the later development of the tango was significant. Thompson's argument would be better served by focusing on those aspects that truly illustrate this influence, and not forc-

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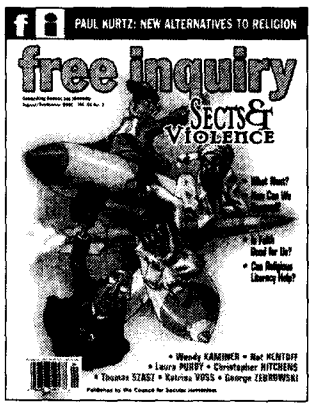

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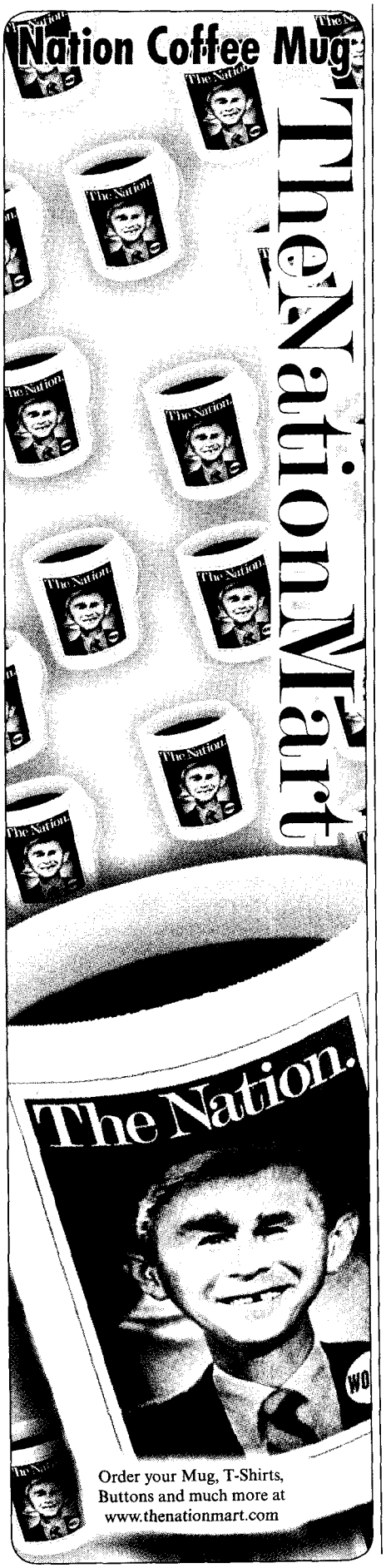

ing them to be the only, or even the most important, sources of inspiration.

The book really comes alive in Thompson's discussion of the African community in Buenos Aires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hailing predominantly from the kingdoms of Kongo and Angola, these Afro-Argentines spoke mutually comprehensible variants of Kongolese—the source of the words "milonga," "canyengue" and "tango"—and their native dances provided key steps like the *corte* (sudden stops to emphasize a position), the *ocho* (a pattern of eight drawn with the feet), the invasion of the partner's space with a leg or foot (apparently derived from Kongolese *bumbakana*) and the pronounced lean of the man's body over the woman's seen in some tango styles (especially in the streetwise *canyengue*). Thompson vividly describes many of the steps, styles and meanings of Kongo dancing, as well as the birth of *candombes*, or Afro-Argentine dancing societies, in the mid-eighteenth century, where men and women danced in a highly rhythmic, showy and improvised style (though not in an embrace). Some elements of the dancing at the "candombes" were imitated by *compadritos* (street toughs) on corners and in whorehouses, and these *compadritos* became the protagonists of the *milonga*, and later, the *canyengue* style.

Perhaps most provocative is his argument that *canyengue* not only survived through the dancing of black performers at neighborhood dance "academies" in the early decades of the twentieth century and in Buenos Aires's black nightclubs (the existence of which will be a surprise to many *porteños*) from the 1940s through the 1970s, but that *canyengue* has been passed down to successive generations of both black and white dancers. In 1983 the tremendously successful international show *Tango Argentino*, with its virtuoso *canyengue* numbers performed—in its original cast—by unglamorous, middle-aged dancers, inspired a resurgence of interest in the tango both internationally and in Argentina itself. Thompson maintains that "although not a single black face appeared onstage in *Tango Argentino*, Afro-Argentine influence was felt nonetheless: many of the star couples had mastered *canyengue*, the early black mode of the tango...hence everyone's taste for offbeats, hipwork, and stops."

Since so many of those who originally danced *canyengue* were not of African origin, some might find fault with Thompson's definition of it as a "black mode"; others might argue with the notion that the virtuoso footwork seen in *Tango Argentino* and other shows like *Tangox2* is truly an authentic representation of what would have been danced on a street corner or in a house of ill repute in the late nineteenth century. Then again, Thompson might suggest, there is a truth above facts.

Thompson's mission of restoring the Afro-Argentine legacy of tango is not limited to the dance. He praises the careers of several important black and mulatto artists who helped shape the tango from its earliest days, like the *payador* Gabino Ezeiza (1858–1916), the lyricist Celedonio Flores and the pianist, composer and bandleader Horacio Salgán. Unusually, he sees the *payadores* (who improvised lyrics and music on the guitar, engaging in contests with other *payadores*) as forebears of the early tango musicians, and considers their competitive *payadas* to be precursors of the showdowns between *canyengue* dancers. And he emphasizes that some gauchos were black, like the *payador* Ezeiza—he was popularly known as "El Negro Ezeiza." Flores, the famed lyricist who wrote the words to many of Gardel's songs, was also known as "El Negro Cele," even though he was, according to Thompson, extremely light-skinned.

More curious is the case of the virtuoso Salgán, a key figure in the musical transformations of the 1950s and '60s who was so light-skinned that many would be surprised to learn that he is part black. Most tango histories do not mention his race (although most discuss how he was influenced by jazz), and Thompson is perhaps justified in listing that oversight as part of the "attempt to destroy [the] black-enhanced heritage" of tango. He traces Salgán's roots, finding that his mother was a light-skinned black woman and his father was a white man of Catalan descent.

To dispel any doubts as to Salgán's blackness, Thompson quotes the musician's words to a biographer: "There's also a black dimension to my music. It's not casual, nor flagrant, but part of my origin...my style, and my truth." Horacio Salas, in his book *El Tango*, wrote that "the main characteristic of the Salgán sound lies in the leading role played by the piano, which is played in a manner... that reveals the direct influence of jazz musicians." That influence did not come from Argentina, much less Africa, as Thompson would have us believe, but from North America: the jazz of Art Tatum

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and Duke Ellington. This conflation of African-ness with blackness shows just how slippery Thompson's idea of "African-ness" is, since in his hands it can apply to anything and everything he finds appealing in the tango.

It's a good point, but Thompson, not surprisingly, takes it too far. He insists that in Saura's film *Tango*, one can hear Salgán "scatting" under his breath as he plays the piano. I am tempted to say that many if not most pianists "scat"—or vocalize along with, and in counterpoint to, the notes their fingers are playing—at the keyboard, including Lang Lang when he plays Rachmaninoff! Yet again, Thompson's enthusiasm for a particular kind of performance—which he defines as inherently, exclusively "black"—seems to trump a nuanced reading of the music.

If much of what has been written about the tango is "biased toward literature," as Thompson claims, then the Argentine novelist and journalist Tomás Eloy Martínez's new book, *The Tango Singer*, is yet another example of this bias, for in his novel the tango as a dance does not exist at all. Eloy Martínez left Argentina during the military dictatorship and has since lived in Paris, Venezuela, Mexico and, most recently, the United States. A professor of Latin American literature at Rutgers and a frequent contributor to the daily *La Nación*, he is best known here for his novels *Santa Evita* and *La Novela de Perón*. He is an obsessive collector of stories and cultural myths. *Santa Evita* is a compendium of all the weird tales that have been told (mostly true) about what happened to Evita's corpse in the years after her death. In addition to recounting the myths of the past, he is a collector of the troubling realities of the present (poverty, street children, corruption), which he chronicles in his perceptive and deeply empathetic articles about the state of Argentina, and which later become the gritty backdrop of his novels. *The Tango Singer* is no different. For Eloy Martínez, tango is a pretext (the search for a dying tango singer), a setting (the clubs, cafes and streets of Buenos Aires) and a voice through which to sing the woes of this extremely troubled country.

Tango has been ubiquitous, but one voice continues to stand out above all: that of Carlos Gardel. The fact that Eloy Martínez's "tango singer," Julio Martel, should have a voice like Gardel's (only better) is fitting, since Gardel is the ultimate symbol of the tango. (There was a real tango singer named Julio Martel, born in

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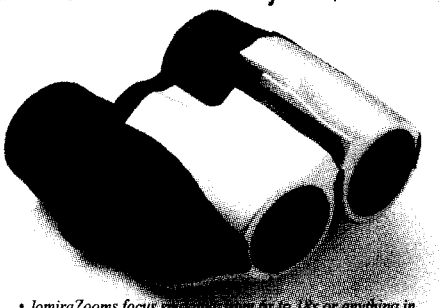

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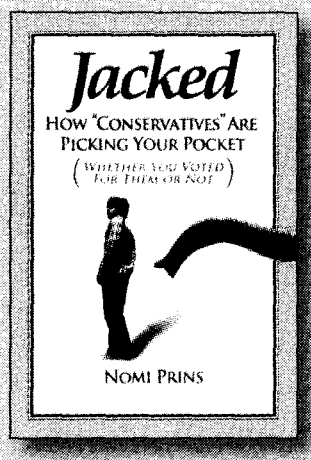

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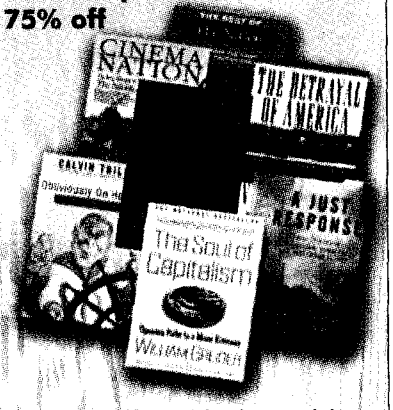

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1923, but he seems to have no relation to Eloy Martínez's character.) Buenos Aires's greatest export, Gardel's image was indelibly set in the heart of many *porteños* by an early death (in an airplane crash) and by repeated, continuous listening to his recordings. Seventy years after his death, people still say that "cada vez canta mejor" (he sings better every day).

Julio Cortázar wrote in his essay on Gardel in *La Vuelta al Día en Ochenta Mundos*: "Gardel must be listened to on a victrola, with all the distortion and flaws imaginable.... In his voice, the voice of the *compadre porteño* is reflected, as in a sonorous mirror, an Argentina that it is no longer easy to conjure." Eloy Martínez makes his Martel a disembodied voice, like the voice from the Victrola, that "glitter[s] on its own, as if nothing else existed in the world, not even the accompanying bandoneón in the background." Eloy Martínez uses the tango singer's voice as a device: Martel sings in seemingly obscure spots around the city to conjure up the terrible events of the last century, or, as Eloy Martínez puts it, "the itinerary of crimes committed with impunity in the City of Buenos Aires." He sings at the spot where a Jewish center was blown up in 1994, killing eighty people; he sings across from the Club Atlético, where hundreds of people were tortured and killed by the *militares*; he sings in the Palacio de las Aguas, a huge, baroque waterworks built in the city center in the late nineteenth century, in which a young girl was murdered, and so he awakens her ghost. As protagonist Bruno Cadogan searches for Martel, he lives through Argentina's more recent disgraces: the financial crisis of December 2001, the resulting protests in which several people were killed by the police, families of beggars living in the streets. Martel's tangos become the city's funeral dirge, its memory, its conscience.

The Tango Singer also links tango to two other themes from Argentine literature—Cortázar's mandala from the novel *Hopscotch* and, more important, Borges's "Aleph." Both are symbols of the entirety of experience: The mandala is a Hindu or Buddhist symbol of the universe, which Cortázar's book replicates in its forms and themes, and the aleph is a single place that contains all the other places in the universe, seen from all angles. In this novel, the tango is an aleph, or mandala, of the Argentine experience.

Eloy Martínez said in an interview in the Argentine daily *El Clarín* that *The Tango Singer* had two starting points: a request from Liz Calder, the editor of Bloomsbury, to write a book about Buenos Aires, and a dream in which he went to Buenos Aires to seek out a tango singer. In the same interview, Eloy Martínez described Bruno Cadogan's research project into Borges's writings on early tangos as a plot device and said that tango music was not an important element in his life until he left Argentina. He ended the interview by concluding that Buenos Aires is the worst and the best of Argentina (he was actually born in Tucumán, in the north of the country).

All of this is very revealing, and explains to a great extent what one experiences as a reader of this novel. Neither the plot nor the tango theme nor the characters have any real weight. They are disembodied symbols, a literary framework on which to hang the very compelling stories Eloy Martínez wants to tell about the brutal and bizarre things that have happened in the country he was forced to leave behind in the mid-1970s. These stories—the assassination of President Aramburu, the life and death by torture of a *guerrillera*—take on a life of their own, dragging our attention away from Bruno's search and Martel's spiritual mission, and making them seem spectral and pale in comparison. Eloy Martínez's sense of truth, his compulsion to tell and retell the stories of torture and death in a country that wants to forget them, is what is most compelling about the novel, but it is also the greatest stumbling block to his story. Who are Cadogan and Martel compared with the victims of the *picana* (the cattle prod used in torture sessions)? Alongside these bloody stories, Eloy Martínez's bits and pieces of lore, like the names of Buenos Aires bars, cafes, theaters and landmarks that he sprinkles throughout the book, augment the feeling that one is reading a kind of cultural and historical guidebook, a series of lists of high—and low—points in the city's past. Perhaps the book's conceit is not strong enough for a novel; perhaps it would have been better as a short story, or a collection of short stories. In any case, it rings false, for all its moments of engrossing storytelling. The book does not read like a novel but like a collection, a compendium hung on a flimsy structure of tango and Buenos Aires lore. Its characters are flimsy and easily forgettable; as soon as Eloy Martínez delves into history, they vanish from our memory. Perhaps it is true, after all, that when the tango drifts too far from its roots and becomes the subject of literature, it loses its soul. ■

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Poetry, From Noun to Verb

JOHN PALATTELLA

SPLAY ANTHEM. By Nathaniel Mackey. New Directions. 126 pp. $15.95.

"Waters/wet the/mouth." So begins, quietly enough, the untitled prefatory poem of *Eroding Witness*, Nathaniel Mackey's first volume of poems. One phrase and four words; two nouns, one verb. They portray what—an image of refreshment? If so, what is the water's source? The poem continues: "Salt/currents come/to where the/lips, thru/which the tongue/slips, part." Refreshment, then, from immersion in an ocean. Perhaps a baptism, or a drowning, is being described. "At the tongue's tip the sting/of saltish/metal rocks/the wound. A/darkness there/like tar,/like bits of/drift at ocean's/edge." Neither baptism nor drowning, then, but an invocation of the muse, and one that mixes exaltation and dread. To open the lips to a bracing power is also to expose those lips to the taste of loss, since, as with the progression of images in the poem itself, the ground turns unsteady and slips away. Or, as the poem concludes, it is "An undertow/of whir im-/mersed in/words." Not driftwood, then, but driftwords.

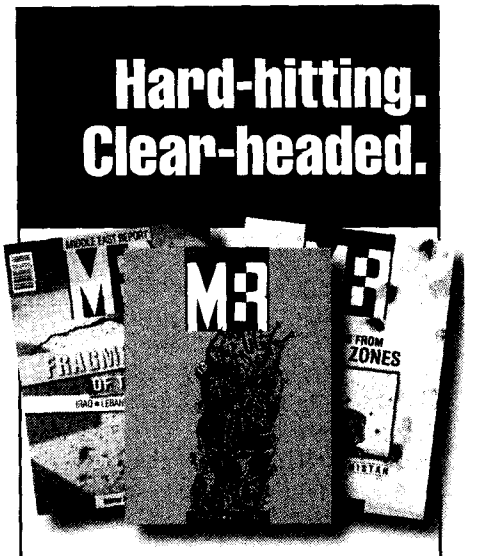
Any number of poets would turn this observation into a lesson about language doubting itself, but Mackey has other things in mind. He is a lyric poet whose probing of wounds and the whir of words reaches into epic dimensions. Beginning with *Eroding Witness*, each of Mackey's four books of verse has contained two intertwined series of poems, "Song of the Andoumboulou" and "Mu." They tell the story of a band of nervous travelers perpetually confounded by displacement, disorientation and estrangement. Like the great Modernist epics, most notably Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Mackey's ongoing series has been stitched together over the course of many years, and its fabric is thick with mythological allusions, from the domestic to the cosmological. The title of "Song of the Andoumboulou" refers to a failed, earlier form of human being in the cosmology of the Dogon people of Mali, in West Africa. The Andoumboulou's song is a funeral song, and its themes of lament and rebirth recur throughout the peregrinations of Mackey's tribe. Mackey also frequently draws on North African mythology. His second book of poems, *School of Udhra*, recalls a Bedouin poetic tradition affiliated with the seventh-century Arab poet Djamil. Like the medieval Provençal troubadours admired by Pound, the poets of the Udhrite school wrote about an ecstatic love-death sparked by a vision of a beloved.

Pound called the epic a "poem including history," by which he meant a poem not only preoccupied with the past but that attempts, through various formal techniques, to make the past a living part of the present. Crucially, Pound always presumed that a poem including history, one in which all ages are contemporaneous, could be written only through the attainment of a point of view outside history. "Ghosts move about me/Patched with histories," he wrote in an early draft of *The Cantos*, the image being a conceit for a visionary point of view capable of resurrecting lost worlds.

For all his shouldering of myths from ages past, Mackey is an epic poet who doesn't share Pound's Olympian ambition of writing a poem including history. "What's more immediate to me is the sense of being contained by history," Mackey explained after a reading in New York City several years ago. What's fascinating about his poems is that they do not always lament the sense of being contained by history. Nor do they seek to restore a lost paradise that transcends history's confines. Instead, they dramatize the search for an imperfect remedy for lives and lands bruised and broken by history. Often turning adversity to their advantage, the poems sing not of resurrection but repair, and *Splay Anthem* is the most delicate and delirious installment of Mackey's epic song of salvage. Its poems speak with a torn voice, a rasp punctuated by gasps of anguish and rumbling with the desire for rejuvenation.

Mackey, who was born in Miami in 1947, grew up in California and attended Princeton University, where he was one of a small number of African-American students. After graduating from Princeton he returned to California

John Palattella writes regularly about poetry for The Nation.



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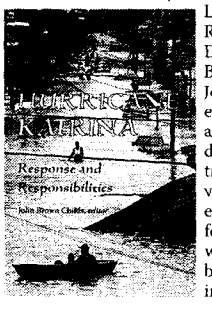

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and taught mathematics to eighth graders for a year. Mackey then began graduate studies in literature at Stanford University; he wrote a dissertation on Robert Duncan's Vietnam War poems and received his doctorate in 1975. Since 1979 Mackey has been a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he teaches courses in literature and writing. His imagination is prodigious. Alongside his poems he has published three novels and numerous essays about poetry and music. He is also the editor of *Hambone*, an indispensable little magazine that for more than a quarter-century has featured work by everyone from Sun Ra to Susan Howe. Equally syncretic is *Tanganyika Strut*, a two-hour radio program hosted by Mackey on KUSP in Santa Cruz. A set on a recent broadcast began with a piece by the flamenco pianist Diego Amador, segued to a song by the Cape Verdean queen of the *morna*, Cesaria Evora, and concluded with a track by Mississippi bluesman Bukka White.

When Mackey was in high school he bought an Ornette Coleman record and played it over and over, enraptured and puzzled by its bleats and blasts. He hasn't stopped listening since: His poems ring with allusions to bop and post-bop musicians, from Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane to Cecil Taylor and Anthony Braxton. But at the center of his pantheon is Miles Davis, the only musician about whom he has written an entire essay. In "Blue in Green" (the title alludes to a ballad on Miles's *Kind of Blue*), Mackey explains that Miles moved the trumpet along "the path from reveille to reverie—extrovert, heraldic axe turned introspective." This movement is most audible in Miles's "less-is-more approach" of withholding or foreshortening notes, Mackey says, a style of playing that "introduces *us* into what's already underway, already there" in a tune. The listener isn't so much addressed by the trumpet, in the manner of Louis Armstrong or Dizzy Gillespie, "as allowed to listen in." Mackey calls Miles's sound "one of emergence—on speaking terms with dream, without a doubt, but awake nonetheless."

Mackey might as well be describing "Septet for the End of Time," the final section of *Eroding Witness*, in which eight historical and mythical personae awaken into introspection. The circumstances are hardly tranquil. The section's title alludes to the "Quartet for the End of Time," written by the French composer Olivier Messiaen in 1941 in a prisoner-of-war camp, and in each poem a persona drifts into fragmentary recollections of his or her past after waking up into, rather than out of, horrifying dreams. But the personae aren't necessarily trapped in a nightmare from which they never awake. Instead, they are simultaneously constrained by history and compelled by musical powers to test its limits. In "Winged Abyss," Messiaen mumbles, "A war camp quartet for the end of time/heard with ears whose time has yet to/begin.../An unlikely music I hear makes a world/break/beyond its reach." Similarly, in "Falso Brilhante," the Brazilian tropicália singer Elis Regina says, while peering through the see-through lid of her coffin, "my self-embrace/a rickety crib I serenade/myself/inside.../And I'm singing all the songs that made me a/star, my arms like wings as though/they were not quite my own anymore..."

The fixation of Messiaen and several other personae on a sudden and violent end of time lends "Septet" an apocalyptic mood. The overall outlook of the series, however, is not apocalyptic but Sisyphean: Loss is inexorable, and the test is how one manages to endure it. Given this outlook, it's not surprising that in an essay about the interplay between writing and music that appeared after the publication of *Eroding Witness*, Mackey seizes on the following sentence from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "The mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived." This sentiment is also implicit in the structure of *Eroding Witness*. "Septet" follows the first installment of "Song of the Andoumboulou," a sequencing that reinforces that the struggles of the forlorn personae in "Septet" are conceived against those of the Andoumboulou. As Mackey is fond of saying, the Andoumboulou are "not simply a failed, or flawed, earlier form of human being" but "the work-in-progress we continue to be."

By "work-in-progress" Mackey doesn't mean some New Age scheme for self-realization. Instead, he's talking about the possibility of fulfillment in the midst of anguished ground, a predicament that coalesces in his poems around the history of forced migrations from Spain, North Africa and West Africa to the Caribbean, Latin America and North America. In "Song of the Andoumboulou: 4," in *Eroding Witness*, a nameless speaker announces, "The rocks/inside our stomachs/want blood," a reference to the holy Santería stones that Yoruba slaves are said to have carried in their bellies to Cuba and Brazil. The opening lines of the first

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poem of *Whatsaid Serif*, Mackey's third book of poems, inventory the names of central cities of the slave trade. The poem then vividly alludes to the Spanish Civil War and Federico García Lorca, a poet whose overlapping interests in the Moorish remnants of Andalusia, the vernacular roots of the Harlem Renaissance and the mysterious trait of flamenco singing known as *duende* have always been touchstones for Mackey. The African and Arab diasporas play a part in *Splay Anthem* too, but the book's migrations also span an uncharacteristically contemporary landscape. At one point the wandering tribe of the Andoumboulou poems piles into a van and cruises around Los Angeles, eventually having a bite to eat at a children's restaurant called Chuck E. Jesus. Salvation on the cheap.

Mackey is equally sensitive to how the history of the diaspora has been cheapened. In an essay on the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, a writer second only to Robert Duncan in Mackey's personal canon, Mackey writes that it is "customary to speak of the West Indies almost wholly in terms of cultural deprivation or cultural parasitism." Following Harris, Mackey notes that the novels of V.S. Naipaul epitomize this tendency by judging the West Indies according to European cultural standards. Naipaul clings to the conventions of European fiction to insulate himself against the islands' "conventionlessness." Harris, on the other hand, writes about the West Indies in a way that avoids "imprison[ing] it in its deprivations." "The insularity of the various African peoples brought to the New World," Mackey argues, "was broken or dislocated by the Middle Passage. Harris views this breakage, this amputation, as fortunate, an opportune disinheritance or partial eclipse of tribal memory that called creative forces and imaginative freedoms into play."

Such a breakage occurs in the last pages of *Splay Anthem*. Not long after the wandering tribe leaves Chuck E. Jesus, its van explodes. As the smoke clears, the tribe finds itself in a place called Nub, a shrunken land strewn with debris and where the bells of trumpets are filled with insect husks. It gets worse. In the final poem of *Splay Anthem*, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 60," Nub itself collapses:

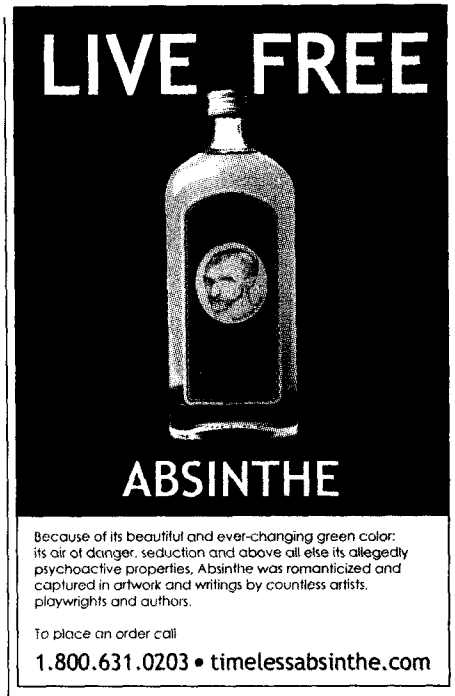
> Nub no longer stood but lay and we
> lay with it, earth-sway cradling our
> backs. What the matter was rocked
> us, a way we had with dirt, awaiting
> what
> already might have been there...
> Dust...

These lines are startling because they describe disintegration with a majestic music. Instead of sounding panicked, like the apocalyptically fixated personae of "Septet," the lines are confident and calm, their gentle rhythmic sway complemented by soft alliteration and assonance. The tribe's situation sounds limned with possibility.

Then again, the tender tones of the lines could be deceptive, a means of concealing anguish. The disintegration of Nub occurs at the end of *Splay Anthem*, so it's impossible to know whether the breakage that has beset the tribe is a fortunate one. For all their soothing music, the lines leave the tribe swaying on a dusty threshold, thereby frustrating the wish for a definitive conclusion. In *The Odyssey* the wandering Odysseus returns home because of his ability to respond to circumstances that continually change. In the epic of the Andoumboulou poems, the only dwelling the wandering tribe can hope to inhabit is amid continuous change.

As Mackey knows, to write such an epic is to risk cultivating a macabre obsession with wounds, a habit that is all too common, whether it's Oprah touring Auschwitz or a literary theorist fixated on trauma. In "Gassire's Lute," a book-length essay on Duncan's Vietnam War poems based on his dissertation, Mackey notes that Duncan walks a tightrope between "humanist outrage and a cosmologizing acceptance of war.... The outrage has to do with the suffering of actual men and women and the cosmology, the poetics, with our being other than the suffering part of ourselves." Throughout the Andoumboulou poems Mackey walks a similar tightrope, one stretched between the poles of humanist outrage and a cosmologizing acceptance of the diaspora. He favors neither pole, instead spending most of his time at the tightrope's midway point. He almost never loses his balance.

Another constant strength of the Andoumboulou poems has been Mackey's talent for making lines, and in *Splay Anthem* his skill has grown so supple and refined that it seems deep and familiar to him, yet never mechanical. His typical materials are two- and three-syllable words bundled into phrases and lines that begin emphatically with a strong stress; lines vary in length from two to ten syllables and are usually enjambed unpredictably. Cadences are vigorous and varied, whether they animate description ("spiked earth at the/soles/of our feet, heels and the/balls of our feet/pestling/light"), lament ("That the/dead return in luxury



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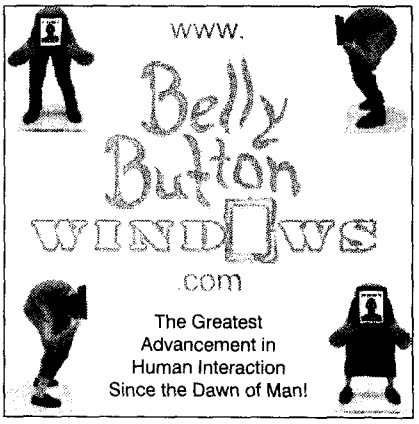

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cars made/us/weep, pathetic its tin elegance,/pitiable") or scat ("Iridescent fin,/redacted foot.../Recidivist fish, irredentist/wuh...").

Sound is often the immediate hook of Mackey's lines because his syntax makes sense crabwise. Phrases and lines usually begin without denoting clear subjects or objects ("What the matter was rocked/us"), thereby creating a sensation of suspension often compounded by the presence of the conditional, one of Mackey's favorite moods. Mackey also enjoys using anagrams and puns to rearrange the familiar into the strange. Because of this crabwise logic Mackey's lines feel simultaneously abraded and buffed, their meanings fugitive, tremulous, mercurial. "As Monk's tune 'Jackie-ing' tells us," Mackey has written, "even a so-called proper noun is a verb in disguise—present-participial, provisional, subject to change." What better way to describe the prosody of *Splay Anthem* than to call it the art of Mackey-ing?

Splay Anthem is at times difficult, but its difficulty isn't anything outlandish, since Mackey's poems work by exploiting the slippages and stutters of ordinary language. And Mackey's ambition isn't to perfect a certain experimental strain of literary eloquence. In the preface to *Splay Anthem* Mackey calls poetry a "phantom limb, as if certain aroused and retained relations among consonants and vowels and progressions of accent were compensatory arms we reach with." In a sense, the sounds of this phantom limb reincarnate the migratory breakages and drifts chronicled in the poems. When Mackey forces words to creak, he's not only making a virtue of linguistic flaws but also trying to stretch language to grasp something that he can't begin to name; the words always fall short, but failure is also evidence of the imperturbable search for an alternate voice. Try again. Creak again. Creak better. The fleeting pleasures of this endless search are spotlighted in *Splay Anthem* in four poems dedicated to Glenn Spearman, a free-jazz tenor saxophonist in the Coltrane tradition who died in 1998: "Music/the breath we took.... It was only/there we wanted to be, the everywhere/we'd always wanted,/ours,/albeit/only an instant, forever, never to be/heard/from again."

"Aren't we all, however absurdly, amputees?" This question is posed by N., a fictional composer and jazz musician, in a letter to his friend Angel of Dust. The missive is the second in a series of N.'s letters, all but two of which have formed the contents of Mackey's three novels. "Aren't we all, however absurdly, amputees?" is also a question Mackey has been asking the readers of his poems, with *Splay Anthem* being its most tenacious expression. The question is a provocative one because it hints that isolation, alienation and struggle aren't limited to the existential crises of race and the diaspora. We all, however absurdly, may have a phantom limb.

To begin to sense why, abandon yourself to the textures of Mackey's lines, where you may find yourself facing a landscape of whir, one that, while offering no place to hide from the precariousness of life lived before the unknown, also holds a potential balm. "We stood/on the lake's bed, what was left/of it,/wished-for new beginnings no beginning,/the new world we expected up in/smoke. Again gave thought to the/he and she we saw embrace, etched/andoumboulouous forms we saw/in the/dirt, thought we saw Rorschach-wise," Mackey writes in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 56." *Splay Anthem* is enchanting and haunting, provocative and unsettling. It speaks in a forked tongue, as if, on some lower frequency, it might be Mackey-ing for us all. ■

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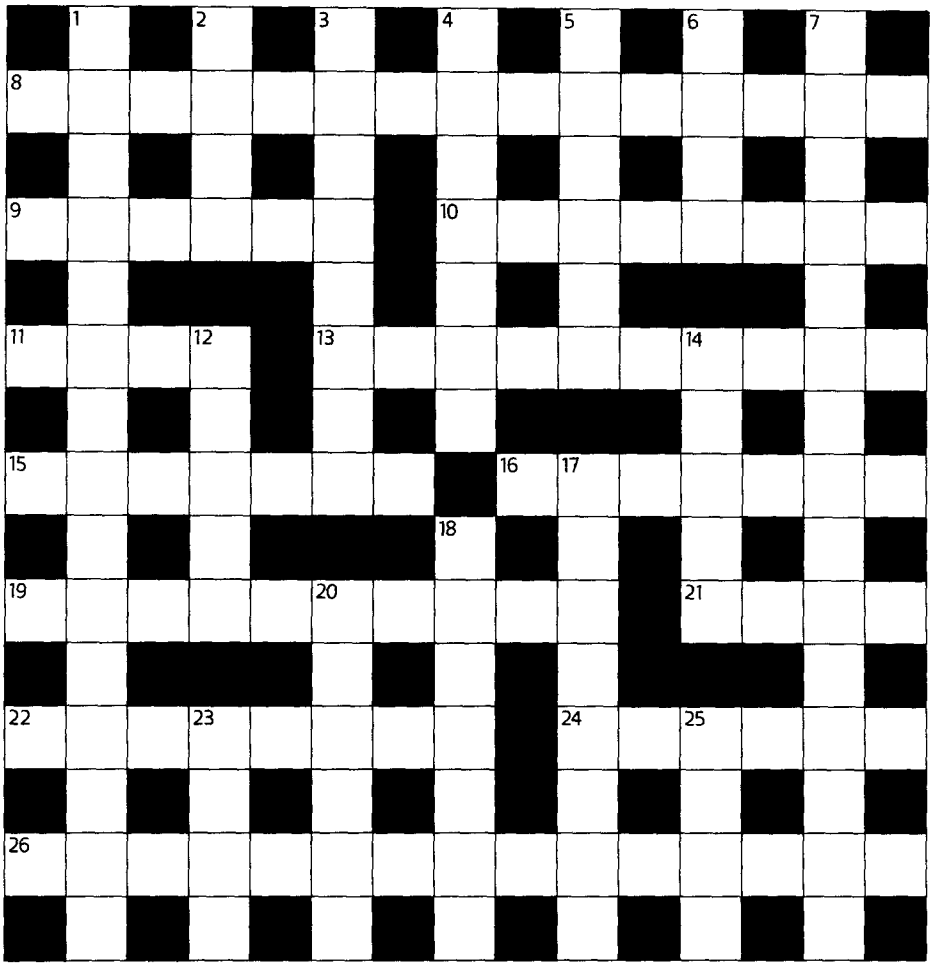

ACROSS

8 Good profits, by the sound of it, when the weather is what you expect. (15)

9 How the money might be put away, when your lips are. (6)

10 Returning things that hold what may bite on the lake, as know-it-alls may show. (8)

11 Run down, or run this up. (4)

13 They used to be able to tell the time, but not if they ran dry. (10)

15 A good beginning gets lost badly at the end, where the Lily Maid hung out. (7)

16 Back of the shoulder, where you get to clap us a bit excitedly. (7)

19 At least such entertainment should be clean—perhaps with singing in the shower. (4,6)

21 A number in the hat might tell you this, but it's sometimes a bit sticky. (4)

22 Poker debts to suit those who read a lot? (8)

24 Those who act high and this are not always so. (6)

26 Hurried in the back street to get to that place Foster often reminisced about, which involves putting things in the pot again. (15)

DOWN

1 Bothers owls, perhaps, being those who try to take care of the problem. (7-8)

2 At least two baskets recommended for storage of such. (4)

3 Stole the "cubes" with a Queen of the Iceni? (8)

4 Hid things away, and sort of sat on top of the outhouse. (7)

5 Formed by some British football types, there being little science to the spirit, at one point. (6)

6 Perhaps cause a knockout by bringing up those things coming from Brazil, according to Charlie's aunt. (4)

7 It gives definite form to something, to shed a tear with a stock-keeper when I turn Alpha and Omega into a sort of it. (15)

12 Almost completely grow up with a collection. (5)

14 More than one copy of "Patsies"? (5)

17 An armored wall for a companion in a lawsuit? (8)

18 Possibly firs in a clump where you might find an example of a Holstein. (7)

20 Right on time to help someone with the correct line. (6)

23 Perhaps tend to put something on the car gives the body shop the business! (4)

25 Obtained "Hell!" at first, being one of those nasty invaders. (4)

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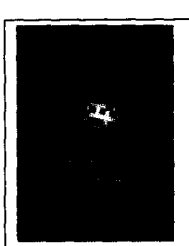

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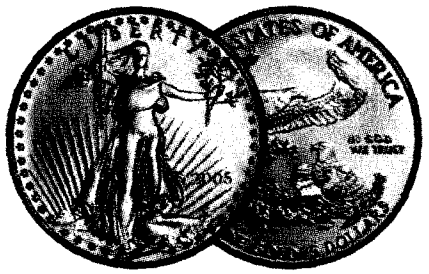

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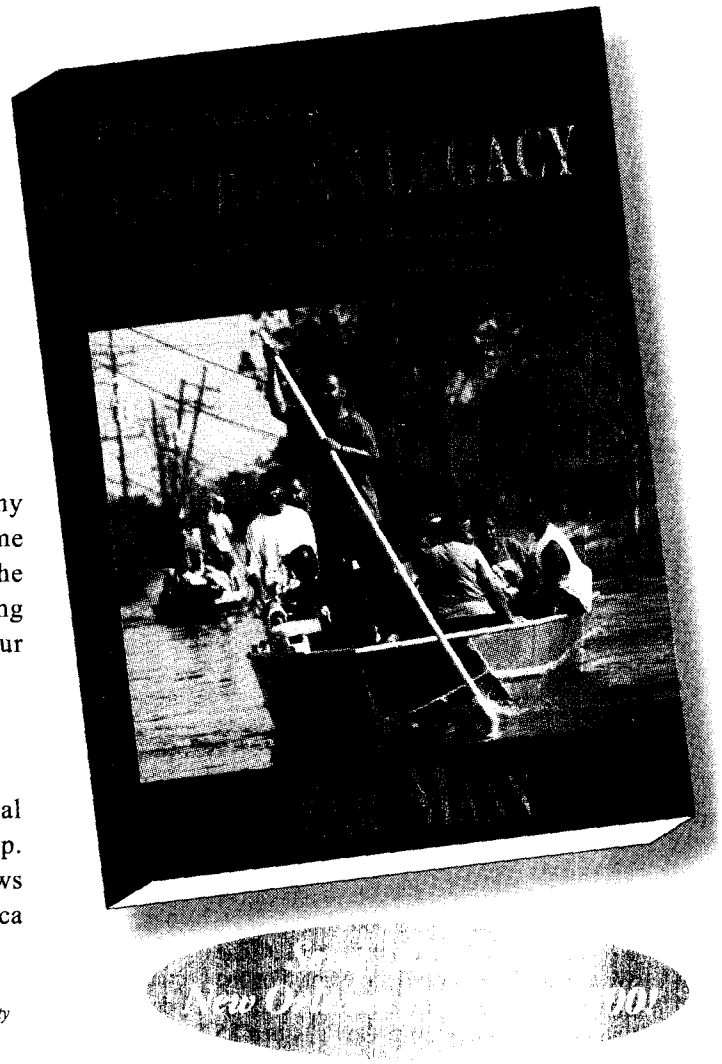

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